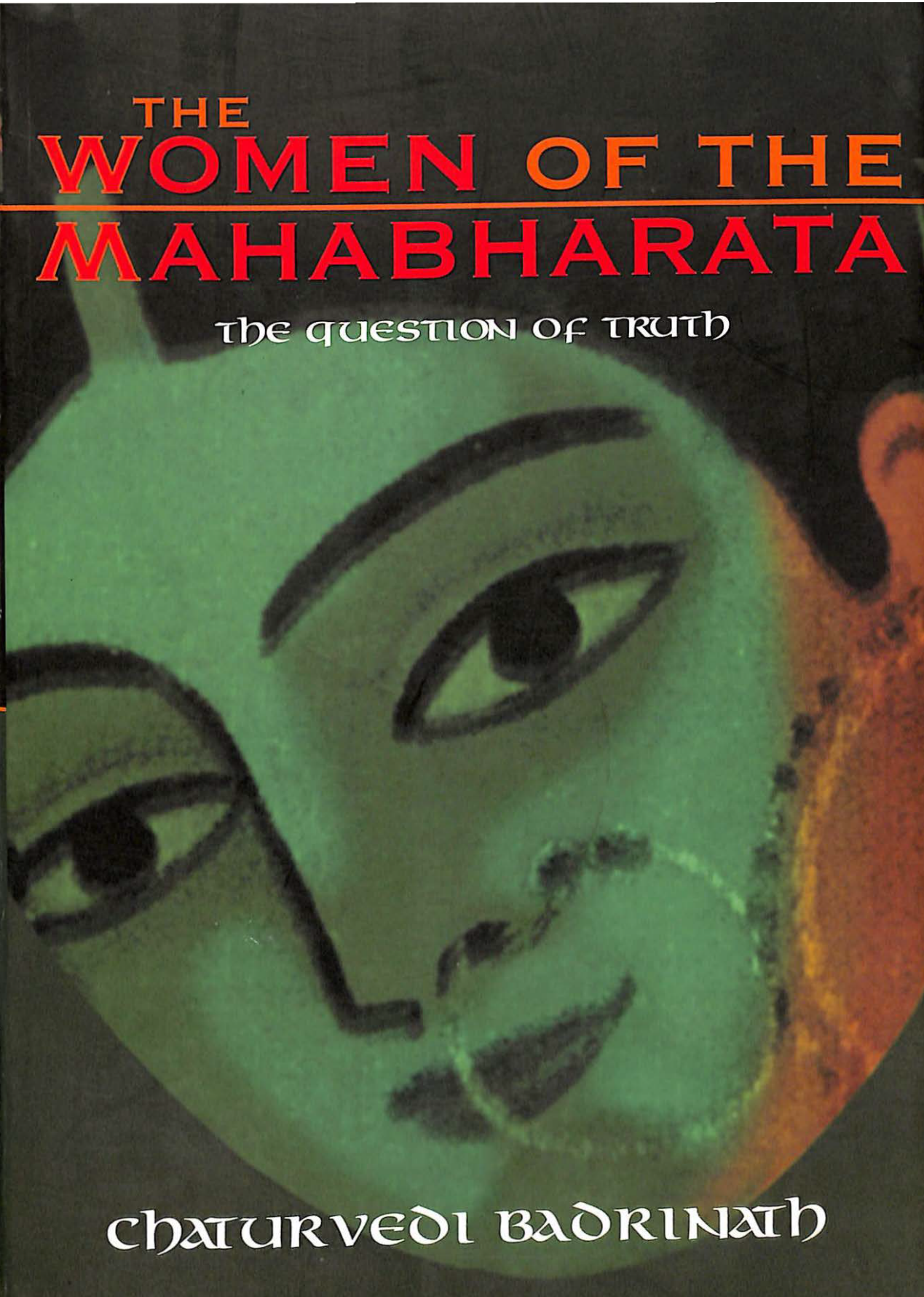
THE WOMEN OF THE MAHABHARATA

The Question of Truth



CHATURVEDI BADRINATH

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To Rashna Imhasly and to Sudhamahi Regunathan, for their profound response to the *Women* here, such that opens several areas of further inquiry and thought as regards the dignity of woman as a person in her own self and her natural stature as a teacher of mankind, two of the main concerns of the *Mahabharata*. Of greatest personal encouragement to me, the range and the depth of their responses, insightful writings in themselves, should be shared by all those who would in this book meet the *Women*. Maybe, at a future date, the publishers may consider bringing them together in the form of an 'Appendix' to this book.

Rashna's response, particularly to the story of Madhavi which outraged her, her outrage resembling the outrage some women of the *Mahabharata* would express in certain situations, raises the further question of the theoretical framework, of one kind or another, in

which the women of the *Mahabharata* are generally seen in modern writings and, it is further claimed, should be seen; but because each framework is itself a product of yet another theory, are quickly judged in the light of that theory alone, and thus misjudged in their essence.

From Sudhamahi's most sensitive and attentive reading of the *Women,* primarily at the level of highly cultivated empathetic *feeling,* such that the women of the *Mahabharata* would advocate, I have learnt much. Her responses to Savitri, Shakuntala and Draupadi were of deepest encouragement to me. In one of her responses she wrote: 'I spent some time with Suvarchala last night, sharing her understanding or concern about words, meaning and the *unworded* (emphasis mine). I sat with the *unworded* for hours after....' On reading a footnote I had (lightheartedly of course!) added about Yudhishthira's curse on womankind that 'no woman would be able to keep a secret', pronounced after his mother Kunti had kept it a secret that Karna was his elder brother, Sudhamahi pulled me up sharply by saying: 'don't fall into Yudhishthira's trap by asking if his curse on womenfolk still operates!' I have deleted that footnote. Finally, about the *Mahabharata*'s portraits of the women here she wrote: 'combining love with respect, they are an ode to feminity'.

To Pooja Pande, for her detailed and very perceptive response to the *Women* here. 'I love the dialogue', she wrote. 'The conversations really drive it forward and give it that very human element of argument, discussion, wordplay, placation, manipulation, self-expression. How we all employ words for those reasons. (Savitri tricking Yama, for instance.). Moreover, 'I like the sense of everyday-ness and ordinary life that is always there. Parents anxious about children at home, while children are, in fact, arguing with death.'

To Chitra Srinivasmurty, who has met all the *Women* here, for her intense appreciation of their portraits in this book.

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his 'irreverent' perception of the Savitri–Yama encounter, that 'Yama, the Lord of Death, had increasingly fallen in love with Savitri, by the sheer force of her appeal', 'asking her repeatedly to go back, all the time hoping she doesn't, so he has a few more minutes with this extraordinary woman.' 'And his attraction to her that he calls *'bhakti'*. The Lord of Death in love with a mortal—certainly opens a new way of reflecting upon the mortality–death relationship.

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Finally, to Hemlata Shankar, my publisher, for editing the manuscript with the attentive care it required and in my conversations with her when I began to speak of them as *our Women*, for her saying: 'I am happy to share the ownership of these *Women*.'

If I have already received wide appreciation from those who have met one or two, or all of the *Women of the Mahabharata* here, it is wholly because of the quality and the universal appeal of those women themselves—about whom Pooja Pande wrote in a letter to me, 'who cannot and will not be trapped within the pages of a book, even yours.'

9 March 2008 **Chaturvedi Badrinath**

Preface

It requires a word of explanation why, from among the numerous women of the *Mahabharata*, I have assembled here only twelve. They are those who are either known mostly in their caricature, like Shakuntala and Savitri, even Damayanti, or not known at all, like Suvarchala, Sulabha, Uttara Disha, even Madhavi, and Kapoti, a woman of another species. Also they are those, like the unnamed housewife (*Anamika,* meaning 'the woman without a name'), Urvashi and Devayani, in whose voices the *Mahabharata* teaches us several other profound truths about human life. Finally, among my twelve women of the *Mahabharata*, there is Draupadi, frozen in vernacular literature and in the popular mind only in two or three standard images, and thus known widely but mostly in her caricature. If she occupies the largest space in this book, it is because she occupies a most considerable space among the women of the *Mahabharata*, teaching us many profound lessons.

Independent in itself, this book may be regarded as the accompanying volume of my *The Mahabharata: An Inquiry in the Human Condition.*[1] Some of the women here are there as well.

1. Published by Orient Longman, July 2006. Hereafter referred as Badrinath Mahabharata.

Introduction

The Sage Galava had to go on a mission he thought was as urgent as it was important. He spoke to his friend Garuda, the Great Eagle, who offered to fly him to his destination. After they had flown a long distance, Galava said to his friend: 'You are flying so very high that there is darkness everywhere and I can see nothing. You are flying with great speed, and I am frightened. I can see neither your body nor mine. All I can see are the flames your wings produce against the wind, and I cannot bear your speed. Neither am I now sure that I want to go where I had said that I wanted to go. Slow down, my friend, and let us go back.'[1]

'Very well,' Garuda said, 'there is a hill on the sea coast ahead: we will rest there, have some food, and return.'[2]

Descending on the hill, they saw a woman, Shandili, who had on her face the glow of some ineffable energy. They saluted her most respectfully; and she offered them food, wholesome and satisfying, and, there on the earth, the two men fell into deep sleep.[3]

When Garuda awoke, he saw that his wings were severed from his body, and without them he looked like a lump of flesh. Distressed by what had happened to his friend, but worried no less about himself, Galava asked him how long they might have to remain there in that condition. It seemed to be some kind of punishment, but he wondered why. He said to Garuda: 'you didn't think some offensive thoughts about the woman, or did you?'[4]

Garuda said: 'what I thought was that I should fly this woman where Brahma is, where Vishnu is, where Shiva is, where Dharma is: for, I thought, that is there this good woman should live.'[5] Then

1. *Udyoga-parva*, 112.10–15.
2. Ibid., 112.22.
3. Ibid., 113.1–3.
4. Ibid., 113.4–7.
5. Ibid., 123.8–9.

he spoke to Shandili thus: 'I had that thought in my mind with a desire only to do good to you. It looks, as though it did not please you. Right or wrong, I seek your forgiveness.'[6]

Hearing this, Shandili was pleased, and said to Garuda:

> Fear no more. Hereafter your wings will be even more beautiful and powerful. In your thoughts you *had* denigrated me. Whatever I am, and what I have achieved, is owing to my own conduct, which has in it no blemish. It is *that* which has brought me the power of goodness.[7]
>
> Good conduct fulfils the order of life, and from good conduct comes prosperity as its fruit. It is from good conduct that one obtains well-being; and it is good conduct that removes the blemishes of life.[8]
>
> May you live long, the King of Birds! But don't denigrate me ever again. Indeed, don't ever insult a woman.[9]

But where was the denigration, where the insult? On the contrary, Garuda had thought Shandili to be so elevated a being that she merited the company of the gods. Left unsaid, what Shandili, and in her voice, the *Mahabharata* was saying was that a woman rooted in the goodness of her being, and in its truth, needed not, even the company of the gods. Goodness is its own standard, to which the gods can add nothing. The women of the *Mahabharata*, assembled here, neither derive their identity from men nor do they draw their inner energies from the gods of the universe.

* * *

Lord Shiva and his wife Uma had come to the end of a long conversation, in which they had together explored many questions concerning the human condition. He said to her:

> Now I want to ask you: what is the *dharma* of a woman? You are my wife. Your character and resolve are like mine. The strength of your energy is equal to mine. Half of my being is suffused with one

6. Ibid., 113.10–11.
7. Ibid., 113.12–4.
8. Ibid., 113.15.
9. Ibid., 113.16.

half of *your* being. You have known many of the greatest women. Therefore, what *you* say about woman would become authority: women are especially the standard for women. That is because what women say has acceptance among women, and what men say does not have among women quite the same importance.[10]

Uma replied:

I now feel inspired to talk of the *dharma* of woman. But let me first consult these great rivers assembled here to listen to this part of our conversation. They all flow into the ocean: Vipasha, Vitasta, Chandrabhaga, Irawati, Shatadru, Sindhu, Kaushiki, Gautami, Yamuna, Narmada, Kaveri, and the most sacred of them all, Ganga. To me, to consult them will be to honour them. Woman always follows woman.[11]

Turning to them, Uma said:

I see neither on this earth nor in the heavens anybody who has obtained knowledge all by himself, without help from others. Therefore I seek your advice.[12]

On being asked by the other rivers to be their voice, the river Ganga said to Uma:

Himself (or herself) competent in every way, one who seeks the opinion of others nevertheless, and gives them respect without being devious, is indeed a true *pandita*, scholar. With the divine knowledge within you, you can in your own light pronounce on the *dharma* of a woman.

Thereupon Uma advanced a position on that subject which was familiar then, and has been familiar since. The substance of what she said was:

A husband alone is woman's god, her friend and her support: there is neither support nor god like her husband.[13]

But that was not the heart of the parable. It negated firstly Shiva's pronouncements that '*women are especially the standard for women*',

---

10. *Anushasana-parva*, 146.9–11.
11. Ibid., 146.16.
12. Ibid., 146.23.
13. Ibid., 146.55.

and *'what men say does not have among women quite the same importance'*. It negated also Uma's own view that *'woman follows woman'*. It is doubtful that any of these propositions is wholly true, or is true always; but the fact that they were advanced in the *Mahabharata* is in itself of great significance.

The meaning of the conversation between Shiva and his wife on the *dharma* of a woman is to be seen in the presence of the rivers there, as a brilliant literary device to point to the truth that, like a river, woman is the flow of life, and that flow is feminine.

There is a method in the *Mahabharata*'s reflections on woman as the flow of life. First of all, a truth as perceived by a woman is stated, the truth of a particular woman in a particular situation, in language that is straight and clear. But that statement concerning the truth of things being incomplete, many other things about the human condition are then conveyed through the life of the same woman in a different context, and through the lives of other women. That process is a continuous one in the *Mahabharata*, for it is a continuous process in human relationships. No truth is ever ignored, however incomplete; but every individual truth is shown to be pointing towards a greater reality. However, given the nature of language, what that greater reality is, can never be stated in words without inviting the charge of incompleteness. This suggestion, too, comes from a woman in the *Mahabharata*. The truth that can never be completed through *vac*, speech, is to be completed in the *living* of truth.

Secondy, every story has no doubt a central focus, which is a personal focus; but simultaneously it says many other things that are independent of it, and may not even be stated. Thus, for example, the story of Galava and Garuda points also to a universally experienced irony. Still on his journey, Galava no longer sees any meaning in it. 'I am now not even sure if I want to go where I thought I had an urgent mission to go. Let us go back.' Flying with immense speed, Garuda, said to him, 'but why didn't you say so at the beginning itself?' Galava *could* not have: he had to travel some distance in order to become aware of the meaninglessness of the journey he had embarked upon. Some become aware of how meaningless the aim was *after* they have achieved it, often at great cost to themselves and to the others.

This irony besides, the story is saying another thing as well. Great speed blurs everything, a sense of direction most of all, direction not in its physical but primarily in its emotional sense.

Thus the third main characteristic of the method in the *Mahabharata* is its use of irony. For irony reveals what philosophy and history never do, or never can, the real character of a person's truth or that of a situation. In moments of one's awareness of the ironies of relationships, one becomes aware not necessarily of their meaninglessness but of their limits. It is then that one sees how foolish, and very often destructive, it is to attach to a relationship meaning it does not have. In all the parables of life the *Mahabharata* narrates, it suggests clearly, but without saying so expressly, that if one can make any sense of life, it is to be sensed ironically. Irony is the laughter of truth.

Fourth, the method is to show that no event of our lives can be understood by itself. In order to make any sense of it, we have to look beyond it; for whatever happens to us is part of some larger truth. It is no good merely narrating the facts, '*this* happened to me; *that* happened to me', but to make an effort also to see the issue, or the issues, which happen simultaneously. Neither do we always narrate an event without filtering it. Much is withheld, much is concealed, which is another form of lie. A plausible justification is then put forward for the withholding and the concealing; but what is plausible is mostly only what is clever, and what is clever is not necessarily also what is intelligent. The *Mahabharata* offers several examples of it, of which the most prominent is Kunti withholding for many long years the truth that Karna was the first-born son she had cast away not long after he was born.

However, in bringing up the undeniable paradox that the personal can be understood in the light only of the impersonal, the *Mahabharata* does not ever disperse the individual, the person, into some grand philosophical abstraction. Truth does transcend the mere personal, but it does not for that reason become unfeeling. It is a gross insult to a human being to answer his, or her, dismay, outrage, unhappiness, suffering, by saying: 'but remember that life is transitory, a huge illusion, and so is your unhappiness and pain', or by delivering a discourse on the origins of suffering, or by talking of the wisdom of

forgiveness and reconciliation always. By narrating strongly that that is what was being done, the *Mahabharata* is showing, as a part of its method, what should not be done but is done all the time. Some of the women of the *Mahabharata* show how, when expressed without *feeling*, grand truths produce the greatest untruths of all.

The quest for the truths of human situations, of one's self, of the *other*, of their mutual relatedness, is in the *Mahabharata* almost always through questions asked by concrete human beings, everywhere. Every story in the *Mahabharata* is in answer to a personal question. 'What was the life of my father like?' 'Who was the progenitor of my family?' 'Do you know, or have heard of, anyone more unfortunate than I am?' 'What does one do when faced with a conflict not just between right and wrong but between right and right?' 'Why did your metamorphosis from a human being into a huge snake take place?' 'What is truth, about which there is so much confusion? What is *dharma*, about which there is so much uncertainty?' Numerous questions, arising from numerous situations. The truths that emerge always have reference to human realities, and it is in them that they are validated.

In the stories through which the *Mahabharata* speaks of life, women occupy a central place. In living what life brings to them, the women of the *Mahabharata* show that the truth in which one must live is, however, not a simple thing: nor can there be any one absolute statement about it. Each one of them, in her own way, is a teacher to mankind as to what truth and goodness in their many dimensions are.

The women of the *Mahabharata* are incarnate in the women of today. To read the stories of their relationships is to read the stories of *our* relationships. They demand from the men of today the same reflection on their perceptions, attitudes, and pretensions too, as they did from the men in their lives, and equally often from other men full of pretensions, even if they were kings and sages. But to create literature is not a political programme, although that is exactly what was made out in this century especially—literature as an instrument of political *idea-logy*. Whatever may be the measure of justice in that claim, it is now perfectly clear that political ideology ensures the death of literature; for it conceals on principle the truth that truth is *anekanta*, many-sided, and never one-dimensional.

Thus, a human situation and its story has not only several levels but can also be read differently by different persons and even by the same person differently at different times in his or her life. That is why I have not *interpreted*, nor *analysed*, any of the women of the *Mahabharata* I have assembled here. What they are saying, the context in which they are saying it, and what they are as human beings, are perfectly clear and require no interpretation, especially if we keep in mind the method the *Mahabharata* consistently employs in its inquiry into the human condition. That method itself suggests interpretation, of which there can be more than one.

Furthermore, every human story could have ended differently than how it actually did. In being a most systematic philosophic inquiry into the human condition, the *Mahabharata* does not see the meaning of a story in the way it ends. The particular end of a story is not the whole of its meaning.

1

Innocence, Love, and the Denial of Truth

Shakuntala

Shakuntala appears at the very beginning of the *Mahabharata*, in the *Adi-parva*. Her story is narrated when Janamejaya, a descendant of the Kuru family, asks Vaishampayana who the ancestors of the Kuru-s were.[1] The name of King Dushyanta is mentioned; and his rule, known for the absence in it of thieves, hunger, and disease, is briefly described, and how, with him as their king, the people enjoyed freedom from fear.[2] Then Janamejaya asks about Shakuntala, Dushyanta's queen and about their son, Bharata, whose name a whole country would bear. 'How did Dushyanta gain Shakuntala?'

And the story unfolds. But that story is not of one's genealogy alone, not even primarily so. At the very heart of it, is the question of truth.

Once, with a part of his army, mounted on horses, Dushyanta set out for hunt. As he passed through the streets of his city, the women saw him, looked at him fondly, and some of them said to each other, 'look, he is so resplendent, so powerful'; and saying this, they showered on him the petals of exquisite flowers.

Dushyanta went deep into a forest, full of the wildest of animals, and soon ran into trouble. But that was not before he and his men had killed hundreds of leopards and lions and elephants, using their deadly arrows on those at a distance, and with their swords those within their reach. Losing all sense of direction, thousands of animals ran for protection, thirsty. When they found in that vast forest rivers and streams without any water, they fell from extreme thirst, and died, only to be eaten in their raw flesh by the wild men who inhabited

1. *Adi-parva*, Chs. 68–74.
2. Ibid., 68.6–9.

the forest. But they themselves turned into a mass of bloody flesh, scattered all around, now indistinguishable from the flesh of slain animals, when the wild elephants ran with fright, their screams filling the air with the sound of terror. Devastating that forest with their lust for hunt, Dushyanta got separated from his men; and hungry, thirsty, and alone, he entered into another forest.[3]

Making marvellous use of contrast as a natural condition of life, it is with great literary imagination that the *Mahabharata* prepares the ground for the story of a young woman's innocence and love. By the time the king rode into this forest, his men, among them some of his ministers and priests had found him. The picture the *Mahabharata* draws of the forest to which Dushyanta was now brought, as if by some unseen destiny, is as faithful to detail as it is lyrical. It is the picture of an enchanted garden. There were trees that almost touched the sky, with birds on them, birds of astonishing colours, chirping and singing. The other trees were laden with fruits, the branches hanging with their weight. There were trees and shrubs and creepers with flowers of varied colours and their luminous glow. The earth was covered with grass of a deep green hue. And everywhere in the forest blew a gentle breeze, cool and pleasant, laden with the scent of flowers. The forest lay all around the banks of the river Malini, full of water sweet and fresh. And there were, on both sides of the river, many hermitages from where came the sounds of sacred incantation.[4]

The king found his way to the hermitage of Kanva, a sage of great wisdom and fame. By now neither hungry nor thirsty, Dushyanta wanted to meet the sage. He asked his soldiers to remain on the limits of the Kanva hermitage, not transgress into it, and wait for him until he returned. He took with him one minister and one priest alone. And as he approached the cottage of the sage, in a gesture of reverence the king removed his crown and the other signs of royalty.[5] Now in his ordinary clothes, he stepped into the grounds

3. Ibid., 69.3–4, 8–12, 19–31.
4. Ibid., 70.3–37.
5. Ibid., 69.35.

of the cottage. Seeing no one around, he enquired in a deep voice whether there was anybody there. A woman soon emerged from the cottage—a young woman.

She looked at Dushyanta and said, 'Welcome!' After asking the customary questions to a visitor, even if unknown, about his well-being, and offering him a seat, the young woman asked the king: 'Who are you? What brings you to this hermitage?' He introduced himself to her and said that he had come there to spend some moments with the great sage Kanva. 'My father has gone out to fetch some fruits, and should be returning presently;' the woman said; 'should you want to wait for a little while, you could meet him.'

Dushyanta noticed that Kanva was not at home and she was inviting him to stay. But, most of all, what he noticed was that she was a young woman of luminous beauty, her beauty enhanced by her visible innocence.[6] Now he asked her, 'Who are *you*? Whose daughter are you? And why have you come to live in this forest?'[7] And he continued to speak: 'The truth is that by your very vision you have conquered my heart. Tell me truly who you are.' Impatient of an answer, he continued to speak to her. 'Tell me truthfully who you are. No, rather listen to me. I have chosen you as my wife. Believe me, I am a man of self-control, and I do not feel attracted to any woman who is not a kshattriya, of my own *varna*. I cannot imagine being attracted to a brahmani. The fact that I have this compelling emotion, this surge of love towards you must mean that you have got to be a kshattriya. Tell me who you are. Accept me, and be my wife.'[8]

Laughing a little at that importunate speech, but also confused by the words of love she was hearing for the first time, the young woman said: 'My name is Shakuntala. Mahatma Kanva is known as my father, both my guru and father. It is him that you should approach with your proposal concerning me. You must not do anything improper.'[9]

---

6. Ibid., 71.10–11.
7. Ibid., 71.12.
8. Ibid., 71. 13, and the following five unnumbered verses.
9. Ibid., 71.14–15.

'But how can Kanva be your father? He is known to have practised continence all his life, and is reputed to have never known a woman. He could not possibly be your father. Tell me truly who you are.'[10]

Shakuntala then tells the king the story of her birth as she had heard it from Kanva—the seduction of Maharishi Vishwamitra by the celestial nymph Menaka; their union—the birth of a girl, whom the mother soon abandons; on noticing the infant, the birds called '*shakun*' spreading over her their black wings so as to protect her from the birds and animals of prey; the sage Kanva passing that way, and the birds asking him to take the girl under his protection, which he does. She was given the name *Shakun*tala after the *shakunta* birds that had protected her in the first moments of her life. She was brought up with great love and tenderness by Kanva at his hermitage.[11] The other scholars and ascetics who lived there loved the child greatly. Surrounded by the healing grace of Nature, she played with the animals there, the deer, the antelope, and talked with them as if they were her friends, and they loved her. She sang with the birds, and swung on the branches of trees. Shakuntala grew to be the daughter and the deity of the Kanva hermitage.

'You are worthy in every respect of being a queen,' Dushyanta said to her, 'be my wife.'[12]

'My father won't be long in coming,' Shakuntala said, 'and it is *he* who will give me in marriage to one he thinks worthy'.[13]

After telling her that her conduct deserved praise and respect, and that he wanted her to accept him of her free will,[14] the king proposes to her the *gandharva* form of marriage, 'the best for the kshattriyas', he said, in which a man and woman wanting each other become husband and wife, their pledge to each other their troth and its sanctity. 'Trust me', said the king. Dushyanta pressed his claim, and Shakuntala thought of the duty she owed her father, but she was also confused by the first awakening of love. Finally she said: 'If the form

10. Ibid., 71.16–17.
11. Ibid., 71.18–42; 72.1–19.
12. Ibid., 73.1–4.
13. Ibid., 73.5.
14. Ibid., 73.6.

of marriage you propose, the *gandharva*, is *dharma*, and if one is free to give oneself to another as you say that one is, then I am ready to offer that gift. But there is only one condition that I shall mention to you. The son born of our marriage shall be king after you.'[15] 'That will be so, I promise you', the king assured her. Dushyanta then married Shakuntala, without ceremony, and they were together. Taking leave of her, he said that he would soon send for her, his army as her escort. He took Shakuntala in his arms, pressed her to his heart, professed his undying love for her, now his wife, and when she began to weep for he was leaving, Dushyanta assured her again.

The sage returned soon after the king had left. The *Mahabharata* describes in simple yet delicate words how, after what had taken place, Shakuntala, afraid and bashful, could hardly speak to her father; although as always, and always her privilege alone, she spread the grass-cushion for him. But her face was flushed with a confused shyness she had never known before. With his power of foreknowledge, Kanva knew what had happened, but asked her nonetheless. In words most gentle and tender, Kanva assured her that she had done no wrong and that Dushyanta was in every respect a worthy man;[16] and she asked him that his love for her now include her husband as well.

Shakuntala was now full with child; and when he was born, there was among the scholars and the ascetics who lived in the Kanva hermitage great rejoicing. The child swung on the branches of the trees, was fearless, and could easily subdue even a wild elephant or a lion. Indeed he was seen playing with the lions as if they were his friends. He was named Sarvadamana, 'one who controls everybody'. Shakuntala took great joy in her son; but her heart was sad and full of fear, for after Dushyanta had left, there had been from him not one word.

She suffered and waited. She could sleep neither in the night nor in the day. She hardly ate; grew weak and pale; and had the forlorn look of one, abandoned. She counted days, weeks, fortnights, months,

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15. Ibid., 73.16–17.
16. Ibid. 73.26.27.

change of seasons, and the years. But Dushyanta had sent no one, as he had promised he soon would, to fetch the woman to whom he had given not only his troth as his wife but also assurance of his abiding love, and it was six years now. Thereupon, Kanva persuaded Shakuntala to go herself where she rightfully ought to be, her husband's home, and asked some of the ascetics living in his hermitage to escort the mother and the son to their royal home. He said to them: 'This daughter of mine was born in this forest, and grew up in this hermitage. I have always loved her dearly. She is innocent of the ways of the world. Take her through a path that will not be too tiresome for her.'

She is innocent of the ways of the world. Take her through a path that will not be too tiresome for her. These words had of course literal meaning, but were also saying many things metaphorical—a characteristic of the *Mahabharata* throughout.

Taking leave of Kanva, Shakuntala said to him: 'you are my father. Should I, in my ignorance, ever have said to you a rude word, or anything untruthful, forgive me.' His head bent low, deeply sad that she was leaving, Kanva was moved to tears.

And Shakuntala set out with her son for her husband's home; sad at heart, for she was leaving everything she had grown up with and loved, but also with great expectations, of her life with her husband, the man she loved, and of their son with his father.

Reaching the palace, they were shown into the royal assembly where King Dushyanta sat in court, and the young disciples of Kanva returned to the hermitage.

What follows is the story of a woman's strength and dignity when the man she loved in the first flush of her innocence and youth, and married, denies that any such thing happened between them, and calls her a liar. But, beyond that, it raises a question that touches human life intimately. How is the truth between two persons, more especially a man and a woman, to be ascertained when what happens between them is in the aloneness of intimacy and without a witness, and one of them denies that truth, denies that they even knew the other. Even both may deny their truth. Is the truth dissolved thereby? Is truth entirely dependent upon a human witness for its proof? It is well known that human witnesses can, and often do, lie.

The king was polite and courteous to Shakuntala, and asked her what could have brought her to his royal court? He even said that if there was something that he could do for her, particularly when she had brought her son with her, he would. On entering the king's assembly hall, she had asked the boy to salute him, his father, and the boy had looked at Dushyanta with great joy in his eyes. But Shakuntala saw no recognition of her by Dushyanta. She could have been a total stranger. Thereupon she stated her purpose in one brief sentence. 'I have come here to remind you of your sacred promise to me, when you married me and we were together, that you would make our son your heir apparent.' In saying that, she was asserting the claim not of her love but of the boy to his rightful place.

Dushyanta (to Shakuntala)

Wicked woman! I remember nothing of the kind you are speaking of. Whose wife are you? No, I cannot recall marrying you ever. Go where you wish, or do what you like.[17]

On hearing these brutal words Shakuntala felt as if there was no longer life left in her. But in the next moment her eyes became red with hurt and anger, which she controlled, and spoke thus:

Shakuntala (to Dushyanta)

Why do you, like other uncultured men, say 'I don't remember' when you do?

What is the truth, and what is the lie, your heart knows. With your heart as the witness, *sakshi*, speak the truth.

He who conceals his true self, and makes it appear to be something else, what offences he has not already committed, having violated his own soul?

You seem to think 'I was alone'; but you do not know that in every human heart lives an inner witness, a greater soul, who knows every deed done, good or bad.

It is a great mistake for a man to think that nobody may know his bad deeds. For the truth is: The sun, the moon, the wind, the fire, the space, the earth, the water, the heart, the controller of life and

17. Ibid., 74.19–20.

death, the day, the night, the two transitions of the day, and Dharma—they all know man's conduct.'[18]

Shakuntala continued to speak, and the whole assembly listened to her in attentive silence. She took them into the meaning of one's offspring, which is not just a biological relationship. She then spoke of the place of a wife, *bharya*, in a man's life, saying:

A wife is the man's half, wife his greatest friend.

A wife is the root of a man's redemption.

Given his wife, the man fulfils the rites of passage. With his wife a man is truly the householder.

Given his wife, a man remains cheerful and happy: indeed those with a wife are with the very source of the fullness of life.

In the moments of intimacy, the friend who speaks lovingly: in the acts of *dharma*, like a father: in adversity, like a mother; the wife is ever a protector of man.[19]

In brief, in the voice of Shakuntala, the *Mahabharata* says:

Sexual happiness, love, and the progress of life: all these are dependent upon the wife. Therefore, even in moments of anger, no man shall do ill to his wife.[20]

Her eyes still flashing with anger, Shakuntala turned to her husband, the king, and said:

Because I have myself come to you, do not insult me. Your wife, I am worthy of your respect, and yet you do me no honour. Why do you, like a low man, dishonour me before this assembly? I am not crying in the wilderness, am I? Then why do you not listen to me? Dushyanta!

Do not lie. If you will pay no heed to my just and earnest prayer, your head will disintegrate into hundreds of pieces.[21]

There is no known case in man's history when a liar's head physically broke into a hundred pieces. Neither was she saying that. Shakuntala was saying, metaphorically, but what is manifestly true,

18. Ibid., 74.24–26, 27–28.
19. Ibid., 74.41–43.
20. Ibid., 74.51.
21. Ibid., 74.34–36.

that *when one takes to untruth and lies, one disintegrates as a person in a hundred ways.*

Shakuntala continued to address Dushyanta:

> What bad deeds must I have done in my previous life that I was abandoned at my very birth, and now abandoned by my husband? Willfully abandoned by you, I will go back to my hermitage, but do not disown this child, our son.[22]

Dushyanta (to Shakuntala)

> I do not know this son of yours. Women are known to be liars. Who will believe what you say? Your origins are low, and you talk like a wayward woman. I don't know you. Go away where you wish.[23]

After reminding him that her origins were greater than his, Shakuntala, although devastated emotionally but in complete command of her self, and by now infinitely superior to the king, spoke thus:

Shakuntala (to Dushyanta)

> There is nothing more laughable in the world than this that those who are themselves wicked should call those who are good wicked.[24]

Looking straight into the eyes of the king, not a broken woman but one possessed of awesome moral strength, Shakuntala finally said this:

> Neither the knowledge of the Veda, nor all the merit acquired by pilgrimage can ever equal steadfastness in truth.
>
> There is no greater foundation of life than truth, and nothing superior to truth. Nor is there anything more damaging than untruth.[25]
>
> King! Don't abandon truth.
>
> But if you must have this fascination for lies, and will not trust the truth of what I say, then I shall, of my own will, go away. With a man like you I must not live.[26]

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22. Ibid., 74.71–72.
23. Ibid., 74.73, 80–81.
24. Ibid., 74.95.
25. Ibid., 74.104–105.
26. Ibid., 74.107.

> But lastly let me say this, King Dushyanta! Even without you, this son of mine will one day rule over that part of this earth that has on its three sides the sea, and the Himalaya for its crown.[27]

Until then she had spoken of '*our* son', but now she spoke of '*my* son'. With the child's hand firmly grasped in hers, and saying to Dushyanta '*with a man like you I must not live*', Shakuntala moved towards the door through which she had entered. The witnesses she had mentioned as greater than man had decided to say until then nothing as to the truth or the lie between her and Dushyanta, and she had for that reason felt abandoned and even more alone. 'In the absence of anyone who would bear witness to the truth of what I am saying, this unfortunate Shakuntala would go away from here as she came.'[28] The inexpressible pathos of it besides, it was again raising the question: '*Does the truth require a witness?*'

At that moment a miracle took place: there was a voice from the sky. It spoke to Dushyanta:

> Do not insult Shakuntala. This boy is yours and her son. Bring him up well, and he will hereafter be known as Bharata. Your wife Shakuntala bears great love for you. See her in that light and honour her. It is acknowledged in the light of *Dharma*, Dushyanta, that women in their goodness have no parallel.[29]

Dushyanta had needed no celestial witness that Shakuntala was his wife and Bharata their son: he knew the truth all the time. Now asking the notables of his royal assembly whether they had attentively heard what the voice from the sky said, he took his son into his arms and kissed his forehead with great joy and pride. Then, with that magic look of love in his eyes she had known before, he turned to Shakuntala and said:

> I had to enact this whole drama, so that the venerable members of the King's Assembly should never think that you are a woman I had fetched from nowhere, and from whom, in a moment of lust, I had produced this child, who for that reason would not be worthy to be king. I had somehow to prove that you are not an ordinary

27. Ibid., 74.108.
28. Ibid., 74. the three unnumbered verses after verse 108.
29. Ibid., 74.110–12.

woman. They had to see for themselves what a magnificent woman you are.[30]

From your anger you spoke to me most unpleasant words, which I forgive; for I know that they came from your love for me.

And now, dearest wife, it is for me to seek your forgiveness. I, too, spoke to you words that were wounding and nasty. Forgive me, which I know from your goodness that you would.[31]

Dushyanta now led them to the palace where the Queen Mother, Rathantarya, was waiting for them. In simple words of introduction, he said to her, 'He is your grandson; and she, your daughter-in-law, Shakuntala.' Overwhelmed by emotion, the Queen Mother took the boy in her arms, kissed him, and took great delight in him, shedding tears of joy.[32] Then, without speaking a word, she drew Shakuntala in a deep embrace.

The Queen Mother, Rathantarya, pronounced to Shakuntala what had been predicted by the sage Kanva, 'Your son will be a great emperor.' With royal ceremonies, Shakuntala was anointed the Queen. Giving to their son the name Bharata, Dushyanta anointed him as his heir apparent. It is from his name, Bharata, that India would acquire its name, Bharata.[33]

Shakuntala first arrived in Germany in 1791, and cast a spell most of all upon German romantics, including Goethe, who dedicated a poem to her. But she was not the Shakuntala of the *Mahabharata.* The Shakuntala who arrived in Germany was the Shakuntala of the great poet Kalidasa, as translated into German (1791) by Georg Forster, which was itself from an English translation (1789) by Sir William Jones of Kalidasa's famous Sanskrit drama *Shakuntalam.* Kalidasa had derived his main story from the *Mahabharata* but proceeded to caricature Shakuntala as portrayed in the *Mahabharata.* Kalidasa, who flourished *c.* 400, the classic age of the Gupta empire, when Hindu society had for the most part settled into its attitude towards woman as an inferior creature subordinate to man, could

30. Ibid., 74.117, 123.
31. Ibid., 74.124.
32. Ibid., 74.eight unnumbered verses, *see* p. 230.
33. Ibid., 74.131

not bear the idea that a woman—*a woman*!—could stand in a royal assembly and tell the Emperor truthfully that it was *he* who was lying and not she, and instruct him as to how truth was an inviolable foundation of all relationships. He altered the original story and made Shakuntala the victim of a curse, robbing her thereby of her moral strength as a woman, and dispersing completely the main concern of the original story. The curse on Shakuntala was invoked by that ugly figure of a reputed ascetic-sage, Durvasa, who was known not for his exceptional goodness but for his irascible temper, quick to take offence and even quicker to pronounce a curse. One day when Shakuntala was lovesick, lost in her own unhappy thoughts, full of dark fears that Dushyanta had forgotten and abandoned her, Durvasa had arrived at the hermitage and, unaware of his arrival, she had neglected to attend upon the great personage. Taking that as an insult, he promptly cursed her that the man she was thinking of would not recognise her; for, in Kalidasa's story, Dushyanta would insist on her producing the ring with the royal insignia he had given her when departing from the Kanva hermitage, and which she would under the curse lose while bathing in the river with the ring slipping out of her finger. Then follows the pathetically convoluted account of the ring falling straight into the mouth of a fish in that river; a fisherman getting that fish in his daily catch and, on cutting it up, with a shock of astonishment seeing in its stomach the ring with the royal insignia; after a brush with a policeman who accuses him of stealing the royal ring, the fisherman arriving in the royal court just when Dushyanta was denying ever meeting Shakuntala, much less marrying her, and was asking her if she could produce as evidence of at least a part of her truth anything he might have given her; her looking at her finger for the ring, which was not there, and which was now produced by the fisherman with his story of how he got it; thereupon recognition instantly dawning upon Dushyanta; his acknowledgement of Shakuntala and, the curse played out, in a very dramatic, almost theatrical, fashion, their re-union.

Shakuntala of the *Mahabharata* would probably have squirmed in embarassment, or equally probably have laughed, if she had read what Kalidasa had turned her into. And it is the Shakuntala of Kalidasa, victim of a curse, who is known to Indians and not the

Shakuntala of the *Mahabharata*, who tells a king not to take to untruth, for he will then disintegrate in a hundred ways as a person.

Could it be that a woman who suffers under an unjust curse has greater appeal than a woman with immense moral strength?

2

The Humbling of the Arrogance of Knowledge

Anamika

It is a woman of the *Mahabharata*, an ordinary housewife, by design unnamed, who teaches us that truth is not a *knowing* alone but in *being* above all. The knowledge that does not lead to *dharma*: ordering one's relationship with one's self and with the *other*, is dead, turning into ashes. The story of Anamika is a story of the humbling of the arrogance of knowledge.[1] But it is many other things besides. It reveals the concealed truth that in their ordinariness, women are extraordinary. It begins with an inquiry Yudhishthira puts to sage Markandeya concerning the complex subtle substance of the place of women in the ordering of life.[2]

> That a woman carries a child in her womb for ten months, and gives birth at the ripe time, what can be more awesome than that?[3]
>
> Often with danger to her life a woman bears a child, gives birth in great pain, and brings up her children with tender care—this seems to me to be even more difficult.[4]
>
> Still more difficult, indeed exceedingly difficult, is how women look after a husband who is uncaring and cruel, from whom they receive only insulting behaviour, and yet, regardless, they live in the truth of their own *dharma*.[5]

In the voice of Markandeya, the *Mahabharata* concedes that this inquiry is doubtless complex and difficult,[6] and then, in his voice,

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1. Narrated in the *Vana-parva*, Ch. 206.
2. Ibid., 205, 1–2.
3. bid., 205.10.
4. Ibid., 205.11–12.
5. Ibid., 205.13.
6. Ibid., 205.16.

pronounces that women living in the truth of what *they* must do in the husband-wife relationship, regardless of the conduct of the *other*, require for their merit the performance of neither rites nor rituals.[7] They become their own force. It is from such a woman that the *Mahabharata* makes an arrogant brahmana learn the truth that the mastery of knowledge is nothing if it does not lead to the mastery of the self.

Kaushika was a well-known brahmana. He had mastered all the *Veda*-s, and, with them, their accessory knowledge. He had mastered the *Upanishad*-s too. He had, moreover, performed some severe penances, and had gained some powers thereby. One day, sitting under a tree, he was reciting the Veda when a bird sitting on the tree soiled his hair and clothes and books with its droppings. In great anger, he looked at the offending bird above, and so great was the force in his eyes that the bird instantly fell dead, burnt to ashes. Seeing this, Kaushika felt remorseful for a few moments, saying to himself, 'impelled by anger, what have I done?' Then he set out on his daily round of begging for food, *bhiksha*, and arrived at a house from where he had once obtained offerings. He gave the customary call, and a woman answered from within the house, 'please wait.'[8]

Kaushika waited, and his anger mounted. When eventually the woman, the mistress of the house, came out with a householder's customary food offering to an ascetic or a monk, Kaushika reproached her in an angry tone:

> What kind of conduct is this? If you were to take so long to come out with the offering, why did you say 'please wait'? You could have asked me to go.[9]

Even though Kaushika the brahmana was red with anger, for he felt insulted at being made to wait for what he thought was too long, the woman answered him in the gentlest of tones. She apologised for the delay, and explained what had caused it. Just before he had given his *bhiksha*-call, her husband had returned home from a long

7. Ibid., 205.22.
8. Ibid., 206.1-8.
9. Ibid., 206.18.

journey, and was very tired and hungry. She had been attending upon him with utmost attention and care, for that was her first obligation as a wife. It had taken her some time to attend to his needs, and she was sorry that a brahmana at the doorstep had to wait meanwhile. However, no neglect was intended, much less disrespect.

Kaushika (to the woman)

So, for you, your husband has greater importance than a brahmana? A householder, you still insult a brahmana.

Even the gods bow their heads to a brahmana, what to say of the mortals. You arrogant woman! Don't you know the power of brahmana-s? Haven't you been instructed in this regard by your elders? The brahmana-s are like the fire. If they wish, they can burn this whole earth.[10]

The Woman (to Kaushika)

Don't be angry, sir. I meant no disrespect to you, but *I am not that little bird either that you reduced to ashes with your anger. What can your anger do to me? It cannot touch me even remotely.*[11]

The *dharma* I obtain from taking care of my husband is what I delight in. I put him in a place higher than even the gods.[12]

It is the kind of life that I live, ordinary, but in devotion to my husband, that has brought me some powers, too.[13]

Just see, that is how I have the foreknowledge of your burning with your anger that little bird. But, sir, anger is the enemy that resides in man's body.[14]

What the woman was telling Kaushika was that he might have mastered knowledge but had little control over himself. She was telling him, furthermore, that she did not even regard him as a brahmana.

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10. Ibid., 206.21–22.
11. Ibid., 206.23–24.
12. Ibid., 206.30.
13. Ibid., 206.31.
14. Ibid., 206.32.

The Woman (to Kaushika)

He who conquers anger, only him do the gods acknowledge as a brahmana.

He who speaks the truth, keeps his teachers contented, do the gods acknowledge as a brahmana.

Who does not return violence with violence, him alone do the god acknowledge as a brahmana.[15]

Self-controlled, living in *dharma*, given to one's chosen studies, clean and pure in one's mind, and who has under his control anger and desire, only such a person do the gods acknowledge as a brahmana.[16]

He who looks upon others as his own self, and all diverse faiths in an attitude of equality, do the gods acknowledge as a brahmana.[17]
He who studies and teaches, performs sacred rites, gives according to one's best abilities, do the gods acknowledge as a brahmana.[18]

Devotion to studies, self-control, simplicity and straightforwardness, and self-discipline: these are to be the abiding *dharma* for a brahmana.[19]

The woman also added a word of explanation about why she was lecturing Kaushika.

Only that must be spoken to a brahmana, which is good for him. Those living in truth have no taste for untruth.[20]

She also decided to tell Kaushika plainly that, considering his conduct, she did not think he knew what *dharma* truly is, not even its first syllables.[21]

It may appear astonishing at first that an ordinary housewife was saying *that* to a scholar of the *Veda*-s and the *Upanishad*-s. Through her, the *Mahabharata* was administering a most salutary lesson that scholastic learning is neither sufficient nor necessary to know the

15. Ibid., 206.33.
16. Ibid., 206.34.
17. Ibid., 206. 35.
18. Ibid., 206.36.
19. Ibid., 206.39.
20. Ibid., 206. 38.
21. Ibid., 206.43.

meaning of *dharma*. It is at the same time doing something even more radical.

The Woman (to Kaushika)

> Sir, if you do not know what *dharma* is, you should learn it from Dharmavyadha, a meat seller, by going to Mithila.
>
> A meat seller by profession, Dharmavyadha lives in Mithila. He devotedly takes care of his parents, is truthful, and keeps his faculties under control. He will teach you the meaning of *dharma*. If you are so inclined, go there, and may everything be well with you.[22]

Had he not by this time been sufficiently humbled by her, Kaushika would certainly have exploded in abusive rage against the woman. A brahmana, a vedic scholar, an ascetic, was he to learn the true substance of *dharma* from *a meat seller?*

Without being sarcastic, but with a hidden sense of irony and laughter at the suggestion she had made, the woman delivered her final words to Kaushika:

> Should I have said more than I should have, or something that was offensive, forgive me. Those who live in *dharma* know also that women are *adandaniya*, above punishment![23]

Kaushika (to the woman)

I am very pleased with you, gentle lady. My anger has vanished. Your reproachful words have done me the greatest good. May all manners of things be well with you. Blessed you are with such a high order of being. I shall now leave, and do what is good for me.[24]

Taking leave of the woman, and full of self-reproach for his conduct towards her, Kaushika returned to his home. The more he reflected upon what the woman had said to him, the deeper was his self-reproach and his faith in the path she had shown him. Resolving to meet Dharmavyadha the meat seller, he set out for Mithila.[25]

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22. Ibid., 206.43–44.
23. Ibid., 206.46.
24. Ibid., 206.47.
25. Ibid., 206.48; 207.1–2.

It is significant that the *Mahabharata* mentions neither the name nor the caste of the woman. She remains *anamika*, 'a woman without name'. This is manifestly by design. For the power of the lesson she was teaching the young brahmana, it was sufficient that she was a woman, and that she was a good woman. In the light of goodness, caste is of no meaning whatsoever. In the light of *dharma*, it is not one's caste but once conduct that alone has meaning. But the most important of all the lessons the *Mahabharata* teaches us in the voice of Anamika, is that the deepest meaning of life is not in the accumulation of knowledge but in the conquest of one's self.

3

THE TRUTH OF DESIRE

A question which troubles men and women everywhere arises from the apparent conflict between the truth of desire and the truth of what is right. And the *Mahabharata* reflects honestly upon this question. The stories of Urvashi and Arjuna,[1] of Devayani and Kacha,[2] and of Uttara-Disha and Ashtavakra,[3] say to us that however strong that conflict may be, it is not irresolvable in principle. But they teach us many other things besides.

1. Narrated in the *Vana-parva*, Chs. 43–46.
2. Narrated in the *Adi-parva*, Chs.76–77.
3. Narrated in the *Anushasana-parva*, Chs.19–21.

Urvashi

The Pandava-s and their wife Draupadi, now in exile, were living in a forest called Kamyaka. Arjuna decided to undertake a severe penance so as to obtain as reward the deadly weapon called *pashupata-astra*, for it was now clear that there would have to be a war between them and the Kaurava-s, and they were preparing for it. When he went to the higher parts of the Himalaya for that purpose, at the very beginning he encountered a venerable man who looked at his inseparable bow and the sword, and laughed. 'But this is absurd', he said to Arjuna, 'for you to come here with your arms. This is not a place for aggression, and therefore not for weapons.' Arjuna was not to be dissuaded. But no sooner did he obtain his desired weapon, though not without a fight with Lord Shiva himself, he encountered a weapon whose name is Desire. That event took place in the celestial home of his father, Indra, where he was taken after his achievement. Indra had organised for him an evening of dance and music, so enchanting that Arjuna's earthly troubles would be forgotten, for a while at least.

Ghritachi, Menaka, Rambha, Purvachitti, Svayamprabha, Urvashi, Mishrakeshi, Dandagauri, Varuthini, Gopali, Sahajanya, Kumbhayoni, Prajagara, Chitrasena, Chitralekha, Saha, Madhursvara, and several other celestial nymphs, began a dance that would cast a spell upon the hearts and the minds of the gods.[4] Indra wanted Arjuna to be well-versed in the divine arts of dance and music, and appointed Chitrasen, the celestial master of dance and music, to teach him those arts. Above all, Indra wanted him to become adept in

4. *Vana-parva*, 43.29–32.

stri-sanga-visharada the graces in the company of women.[5] He had also noticed Arjuna looking at Urvashi with a special look of joy in his eyes, which he misinterpreted. He arranged for her to go to him, and Chitrasen was appointed to persuade her. 'But I need no persuasion, Chitrasen,' Urvashi said to him. 'From the moment I set my eyes on Arjuna, I have been burning with desire for him.'[6]

She prepared for the visit, her mind full of fancy and imagination. She dressed in exquisite clothes, and adorned herself with jewels even more exquisite. Urvashi's alluring beauty is described in erotic language and superb imagery.[7] While she was adorning herself Urvashi imagined a celestial bed on which she and Arjuna would sit in the deep embrace of desire and love. He was the most magnificent of men, she, the nymph no god could resist. And she arrived where Arjuna was.

He greeted her with these words:

> With my head on your feet, Devi, I offer you my salutations. Here I am, your humble servant: say what you would wish me to do.[8]

The words fell upon Urvashi like a bolt from the sky. Still, with some effort, she explained what Indra and Chitrasen had urged her to do, which is what had brought her there. But she needed no urging from either of them, she said to Arjuna, for the urging of Kama had possessed her already. 'Your qualities had for long taken hold of my mind. And my mind has now been taken hold of by Kama.'[9]

Arjuna covered his ears with the palms of his hands, and said:

> Most unfortunate it is for me to hear you say this; for in my sight, dear lady, you have the same place as the wife of the guru. What my mother, Kunti, is to me, so are you, no different. On seeing you, if I looked at you with joy in my eyes, that was because, recalling the legend of your great love for Pururavas, my ancestor, I felt you are my ancestor, too.[10]

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5. Ibid., 45.3.
6. Ibid., 45.15–16.
7. Ibid., 45.6–15.
8. Ibid., 46.20.
9. Ibid., 46.35.
10. Ibid., 46.36–41.

Her senses now aflame even more, Urvashi said:

> Nothing of us, the celestial nymphs, is concealed from those who live in this heaven. We are *anavrata*, uncovered. Do not appoint me to the place of a guru. We Apsara-s belong to everyone: be pleased and accept me; for, burning with sexual desire, I have come to you with a longing that fills my whole being. And you shall honour me. Take me.[11]

Arjuna again repeated to Urvashi what he had said before, resisting her resolutely.

Her lips twisted with anger, her whole body trembling with contempt for him.

Urvashi (to Arjuna)

> Then be cursed, Arjuna! Burning with desire for you, I came to you on my own, but you repulsed me so, and did me dishonour. You are no man. You shall live amongst women as a dancer, without honour. You will be known as a eunuch; and of such a creature, you will display all the attributes.[12]

Cursing him thus, she left.

Urvashi's curse would turn into a protective boon for Arjuna when the Pandava-s and Draupadi had to live *incognito* for a whole year at the end of their twelve-year exile; the most difficult, for none of them was such that could conceal his and her identity.[13]

They all arrived, separately, in the court of King Virata and, concealing their identities, assuming different names, sought work in different capacities in his palace. Arjuna introduced himself as Brihannala.

Arjuna (to King Virata)

> I am adept in dressing in most attractive braids the hair of women, weaving flowers into them with exquisite patterns of many kinds;

11. Ibid., 46.42–44.
12. Ibid., 46.49–50.
13. See also 240–41 of chapter 8 in this book.

in bathing them; and in adorning them furthermore with lines drawn in sandal paste. A eunuch, I can teach the royal ladies music and dance. I have special skills in singing and dancing and playing on musical instruments of every kind. In all these, not even women have greater talents than I have.[14]

Appoint me to teach Princess Uttara music and dance.[15]

Arjuna, now Brihannala the eunuch, carrying the curse of Urvashi and dressed as a woman, wearing gold bangles, bracelets, ear-rings and other jewellery, looked so attractive that the king heard with disbelief his description of himself as a eunuch, impotent.

Virata (to Brihannala)

To me, you look not like an impotent but like someone who could be a great ruler. The position you are seeking, of a teacher of music and dance, does not seem to me to be worthy of you. You look like the sun, with its light and energy, covered with dark clouds.[16]

Brihannala (to King Virata)

For me to tell you *why* I am reduced to this state, what good will it do? It is a sad story, King! Know me to be Brihannala. Just consider me to be a son or a daughter without father and mother.[17]

Virata appointed Arjuna as Brihannala to teach his daughter, Princess Uttara, and other royal ladies of her age, how to sing, dance and play upon musical instruments of every variety. But that was not before he had consulted his ministers whether it would be prudent to let him live in the inner apartments of the palace. Furthermore, he tested his claim to perfection in music and dance. Above all, he had him examined medically by a woman physician as to whether he was actually an impotent, a eunuch, as he claimed to be. After the physician reported that he indeed was, the king gave him the position he had sought.[18] Arjuna as Brihannala began teaching

14. Ibid., 11.8.
15. Ibid., 11.10; see also 11.6–7.
16. Ibid., 11.9.
17. Ibid., 11.11.
18. *Adi-parva*, 76.7–16.

Uttara and the other ladies music and dance, and, keeping his faculties always under control, he soon endeared himself to them. Chitrasen had perfected him not only in music and dance but also in *stri-sanga-visharada*.

The curse of Urvashi had turned out to be the greatest boon to Arjuna in that most difficult last year of his life in exile. But that is not what Urvashi had meant it to be. That is not at all what she meant it to be.

Devayani

Devayani was the daughter of Shukracharya, the guru of King Vrishaparva, king of the Asura-s. Just as there was unceasing hostility between the Deva-s, the gods, and the Asura-s, there was great rivalry between Brihaspati, the guru of the Deva-s, and Shukracharya, the guru of the Asura-s. Brihaspati was endowed with immense learning and wisdom but did not know the secret of bringing the dead to life again, which Shukracharya had. Jealous of that power, the gods decided on a method by which that secret could be had from Shukracharya and passed on to their own guru, Brihaspati.

They approached Brihaspati's eldest son, Kacha; told him what the mission was and it's importance; and asked him to seek, as the first device, his acceptance as a student in the household of Shukracharya. Then they told him about Devayani. She was Shukra's dearly loved daughter. And the way to obtaining the secret knowledge by which the dead could be brought to life again, lay in first pleasing her in every way. For if she was made happy, the father would be pleased, too. Then, at an opportune moment, he could have him reveal the secret the gods were after.

Kacha arrived at the hermitage of the great guru, and with the kind of introduction that he had, by being the son of Brihaspati, he was accepted; Shukracharya saying: 'in honouring you, I shall be honouring my friend, your father.' That was truly generous of him; for, far from being friends, the two were bitter rivals.

Kacha was a young man greatly handsome, having manners that would endear him to any one. Soon the guru came to look upon Kacha as someone his own. Kacha was most attentive to Devayani:

he sang for her, played upon the flute, fetched flowers for her, and they sang together, frolicking as the young do. She, too, became devoted to him, and could not bear to be separated from him for long.[1]

As a part of his daily duty Kacha would take the cows from the hermitage to graze. One evening he did not return, though the cows did, and Devayani had the darkest fears about him, and said to her father: 'Kacha has either died or has been killed. I truly say to you that without him I will not live.'[2]

On a right suspicion as to what Kacha was actually after, some of the Asura-s had indeed killed him, cut his body into small pieces of flesh, and had fed the meat to wild dogs. Shukracharya brings Kacha back to life. The Asura-s, however, killed him a second time, this time burning his body and throwing the ashes into the sea. Devayani said to her father what she had said to him on the first occasion when Kacha was killed: 'Without Kacha, I cannot live.' Shukracharya brings him back to life a second time.[3]

In resolute opposition to their own guru, the Asura-s killed Kacha a third time; and this time they mixed his ashes with the wine Shukracharya would drink, against the rules in this regard for a brahmana. When Kacha did not return, a distraught Devayani appealed to her father again, saying that she could not live without Kacha.[4] Invoking his mantra of bringing the dead to life again, Shukracharya spoke in a loud voice, 'come, wherever you are.' To the great astonishment of both the daughter and the father, Kacha replied that he could not. For if he did, the guru would die, for Kacha was lodged—in the guru's stomach. 'But how did you get into my stomach?' the guru asked; and Kacha narrated the sequence of events that had taken place earlier in the day.[5]

'Dear daughter, now what shall I do?' Shukracharya asked Devayani. 'There is no way in which Kacha can be seen alive again

1. Ibid., 76.23–26.
2. Ibid., 76.31–32.
3. Ibid., 76.41–42.
4. Ibid., 76.45.
5. Ibid., 76.52–55.

except by piercing his way out of my stomach. It is only by my death that Kacha can live.'[6] Devayani said:

> Kacha's destruction and your death, either of these will burn me with everlasting sorrow. I will have no peace if Kacha dies; if you die, I cannot live.'[7]

Shukracharya then spoke to Kacha thus:

> Kacha, you are devoted to Devayani, as she is devoted to you. Now receive from me the knowledge of bringing the dead to life. In the process of your coming out of my stomach I will die. Use that knowledge to bring me to life again.'[8]

That is what Kacha did. On his part, since he was placed in that strangest of all situations because of drinking wine, Shukracharya declared his prohibition on drinking, but only for the brahmana-s.

From now onwards, any brahmana who would drink wine would fall away from the ways of *dharma* and would incur great demerit.[9]

After expressing his deepest gratitude to his guru Shukracharya for the secret knowledge he had received from him, Kacha prepared to leave, for he had lived there for a thousand years already. At that moment, Devayani spoke:

> Kacha! You have now received your desired secret knowledge. I love you. I desire you. Take my hand in marriage.[10]

Kacha

> Devayani! For me, you have the same status, one of reverence, as my guru Shukracharya has. Why, even higher; for he loves you more than even his own life. Therefore you must not speak to me in that way.[11]

Devayani argued that that scruple could be, and should be, put aside; for it was nothing in the eyes of love. He argued that he must not look at her as a woman, for, she being the daughter of a guru,

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6. Ibid., 76.56.
7. Ibid., 76–57.
8. Ibid., 76.58–60.
9. Ibid., 76.67.
10. Ibid., 77.5.
11. Ibid., 77.6–8.

it would be a wrong thing for him to take her as a wife. She reminded him of her acts of devotion in bringing him back to life each time he was killed. He expressed his deepest gratitude, but said that he must leave.

Devayani (in hurtful sorrow)

If you leave me, Kacha, disregarding my love for you, the secret knowledge that you now have will never fructify in your hands, I curse you.[12]

Kacha (to Devayani)

Only because you are the daughter of my guru and therefore like a sister to me, and not because you are in any way unworthy, did I reject your proposal. I do not deserve your curse. What you said, was impelled not by what was right but by your desire alone. I have for you great respect and affection. Wish me well, and think of me sometimes.

Because I did not accept what would have been a wrong thing for me to do, you have cursed me, but unjustly. You were motivated by your desire, I by what is right.[13]

Your curse will not be wholly effective either. For I will pass on the secret knowledge I have gained to somebody else, and it will fructify in his hands at least.[14]

Unjustly cursed, Kacha cursed Devayani in return, that her own desires would never be fulfilled.[15]

The incantation of a woman's desire and love, when unrequited, ended in the howl of her curse. Whether just or unjust, is not the question. That is not the question at all.

In the stories of Urvashi and Arjuna, and of Devayani and Kacha, the *Mahabharata* does not in the least ignore the truth of *kama*, desire. But neither does it ignore the truth of what is right. What is right need not be devoid of joy: neither need the force of desire be

12. Ibid., 77.16.
13. Ibid.,77.12–15, 17–18.
14. Ibid., 77.20.
15. Ibid.,77.19.

the negation of what is right. The *Mahabharata* only points to the fact that they often are. But, more importantly, it points not to some irresolvable conflict between them but to the truth that where desire is devoid of genuine concern for the scruples of the *other*, it ceases to be joy.

These two stories can undoubtedly be read in another light as well. Very often the invoking of the ethical 'right' is a concealed alibi for the fear of woman in the force of her desire, and more deviously insulting because that alibi is so very plausible.

Uttara Disha

It is through the changing contexts in which men and women live their lives that the *Mahabharata* explores the question of the relationship between a man and a woman and its foundations. That inquiry is an essential part of the inquiry into the foundations of human relationships, at once personal and social. In that it follows a method, and follows it most systematically.

First it states the prevalent notions as regards the inherent nature of a woman, notions that are still prevalent today. Then it brings up the attitudes to women those notions simply must produce. In showing how they are self-destructive, because they are false, and mindless as well, the *Mahabharata* completely rejects those notions, and suggests that if a person is to live a sane life, then his and her perceptions of man-woman relationship have to be those of *saha*, togetherness. This word *saha* indicates between man and woman, the reality on which everything in life depends.

The story of Uttara Disha, or Northerly Direction, and Ashtavakra demonstrates that.

In an earlier part of the *Anushasana-parva* a conversation between Yudhishthira and Bhishma is narrated, which concerns the foundation of marriage. It begins with a question, raised by Yudhishthira:

> What is this *saha-dharma,* the ordering of life together, which binds man and woman in marriage? To me it appears doubtful that there is any such thing.
>
> When one partner dies, does anything of *saha-dharma* remain in the one who lives? Besides, when men and women have different natures, different temperaments, are obliged by various circumstances to live at two different places, then how can there be between them this togetherness, this *saha-dharma*?

Some of the law-givers are of the firm opinion that women are given to untruth: if that is true, then how can one living with a woman order one's life? Since one reads even in the Vedas that women are given to untruth, it follows that their untruth must be part of *saha-dharma*: but untruth can never be a part of *dharma*. It seems to me, therefore, that *saha-dharma* is no more than a secondary attribute of marriage, and what husband and wife do together is given the name *dharma* on purely functional grounds. The more I think about it, the more this matter appears highly complex to me. Can you throw some light on this subject?[1]

Bhishma then narrates the story of Uttara Disha and Ashtavakra. Ashtavakra who wants to marry asks the great sage Vadanya for the hand of his daughter, Suprabha.[2] To her beauty there was no parallel on this earth. She was beautiful in every way, in her qualities, in her character, and she had stolen the heart of Ashtavakra. Vadanya said to Ashtavakra that he would happily give his daughter in marriage to him; for, like his daughter Suprabha, he was in every way a man of quality, too. 'But first you must make a journey northward where you will meet somebody.' 'But to where exactly in the north must I make that journey? And who is this 'somebody' that I will meet?' Ashtavakra asked Vadanya.

Sage Vadanya gave him directions.

To Alkapuri, the home of Kubera, in the Himalaya. Going beyond it, you will cross the Himalaya, and reach Kailasha, the home of Shiva. Turning north-east, you will see another mountain, called Mahaparshva, where the four seasons, the day and the night, Time, and human nature and also what is divine, live in their embodied forms. Go beyond them, and you will enter into a deep blue forest.

There, in that land of fascination, you will see a woman, who is old and impressive and is a teacher.

After you have met her, come back; and marry my daughter. If this condition is acceptable to you, Ashtavakra, start right now.[3]

After travelling much as directed, Ashtavakra reached the deep blue forest beyond the Himalaya, and arrived at a hermitage in it.

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1. *Anushasana-parva*, 19.1–8.
2. Ibid., Chs. 19–21.
3. Ibid., 19.16–25.

There he saw a palace that was even more magnificent than the palace of Kubera, the god of wealth, and where he had on the way stayed briefly. Standing in front of its main door, he called out: 'Whoever lives here, and if you can hear, know that you have a guest at your door.' Seven young girls, one more beautiful than the other, appeared in response to his call, and whoever of them he looked at, stole his young heart. He was led into the palace, and then to a large room, where he saw an old woman bent with age, sitting on a bed. After they had exchanged salutations, she asked all seven girls excepting one to leave, to attend upon her. She prescribed that the one to remain behind should be 'self-controlled, deeply perceptive, and at peace with herself.' The 'seven girls' are clearly a metaphor for the seven days of the week.

There were two beds in the room, both looking luxurious. Ashtavakra said to the old woman, 'it is late in the night, go to sleep'; and saying this, he lay on the other bed. But it was not long after, saying that she was feeling cold, that she climbed on to his bed. Out of respect for her, he said, 'you are welcome.' In the next moment, she put her arms around him and embraced him in a deep embrace. But she also noticed that he sat there unmoved, like a piece of dead wood.[4]

Thereupon, distressed by the lack of response from him, she spoke to him thus:

> The only thing a woman wants, finding a man near her, is the gift of sex. Driven by Kama I have come to your service. The moment I set my eyes upon you, I felt within me this upsurge of desire. All my wealth, all that you see here, are yours. Take me. I will satisfy all your desires. Of that, you need have no doubt!'[5]
>
> Here we both will enjoy all the earthly enjoyments. To women, nothing is more desirable than physical intimacy with men.[6]

Ashtavakra said to her: 'I swear I intend marrying someone I love, the daughter of a sage. Of these things I have but little knowledge.

4. Ibid., 19.75–79.
5. Ibid., 19.80–85.
6. Ibid., 19.86.

Moreover, I shall not touch a woman who is another's, and earn a demerit thereby. Understand *dharma*, dear lady, and desist from unrestrained desire.'[7]

The woman answered *that* by saying: 'In taking me, you will earn no demerit whatsoever, for I am nobody's woman, I am free.[8] Can't you see that I am trembling with sexual desire for you?'[9]

What Ashtavakra saw, most of all, was that she was old, ugly, and repulsive. And he felt great compassion for her. Ti.. night passed, and the day, and he still thought, 'What could have made her so repulsive? The mistress of this beautiful palace, so ugly herself? Could she be under some curse? Must I ask her? But no, I must not transgress into her secret!'[10]

While pressing her attention, the woman was pronouncing, too, upon the nature of woman, in words that had in them neither shame nor reproach, just plain speech.

> Aroused with sexual desire, women behave as they wish. Burning with desire they can walk on burning sands but their feet do not burn thereby.[11]
>
> Women desire not even gods as they desire Kama, the lord of sexual desire, for by nature women are given to sexual pleasure, and to that alone.
>
> Then they know neither father, nor family, nor mother. They regard neither brother, nor husband, nor children. Driven by their sexual desire, they break the bounds of family, even as the great rivers destroy their own banks.[12]
>
> Maybe, there is one in a thousand women who is not greedy of sexual pleasures, and in a hundred thousand one who is sexually faithful to her husband.[13]
>
> Why, as you have seen, the fever of *maithuna jvara*, sexual desire, burns even old women.[14]

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7. Ibid., 19.89–90.
8. Ibid., 20.13
9. Ibid. 19.81–82; 20.15.
10. Ibid., 19.99–100.
11. Ibid., 19.87.
12. Ibid., 19.91–94.
13. Ibid., 19.92.
14. Ibid., 21.5

Ashtavakra heard it all and asked the woman to hold her tongue and keep quiet. None of those stupid notions about the nature of woman he heard from her could weaken his resolve to marry the woman his heart loved. Neither was he going to fly into her arms despite the heat of her urging, which by degrees became pathetic entreaty for physical union.[15]

By the time the day broke, the old woman had taken the form of a beautiful young woman, adorned with sparkling diamonds. She massaged Ashtavakra's body with rare herbal oils; seating him on a golden seat, she bathed him, and fed him with the most exquisite food.[16]

Greatly astonished, and now fearful that he was being tested by sage Vadanya, Ashtavakra asked her, 'who *are* you? Why do you keep changing your forms thus? Please tell me truthfully, do not mislead a brahmana'[17] Thereupon the woman revealed herself as Uttara Disha, the Northern Direction, and said that he was, indeed, being tested for his resolve.

Uttara Disha (To Ashtavakra)

On this earth, or in the heavens, wherever men and women are, they have in them, in their physical proximity, the impulse for physical union.[18]

By placing you in the situation of closest physical proximity of a woman, I was indeed putting you to test; but by so doing, I was also strengthening your resolve not to be swayed away from *dharma.*

You have indeed conquered your self, and have thus conquered all sacred spaces.

Sage Vadanya, the father of the girl you wish to marry, had sent you to me to teach you, and that I have done.[19]

Ashtavakra returned and married Suprabha.

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15. Ibid., 20.15, 17–19, 22.
16. Ibid., 20.1–9.
17. Ibid., 21.2
18. Ibid., 21.3.
19. Ibid., 21.4, 7.

In the voice of Uttara Disha the *Mahabharata*'s teaching is that only that man is worthy of a woman who is self-controlled and not addicted to wayward passions. The teaching consists also in the test whether a man would be permanently discouraged by the savage notions concerning woman put forth, *on design*, in savage terms. A woman of the *Mahabharata* teaches us, above all, that the quality of man-woman relationship lies in its *disha, direction*. Hence the metaphor: the woman teaching Ashtavakra being in the form of a *disha*. The direction of the man-woman relationship is determined by their *saha*, togetherness. The *Mahabharata* teaches *saha-dharma*, ordering life *together*, as the foundation of marriage.

In the mankind's earliest dream, the unity of man and woman, the *Rig-Veda* has *saha* as the foundation of marriage.

> With these seven steps become my friend.
> I seek your friendship. May you never deviate
> From this friendship.
> May we walk together.
> May we resolve together.
> May we love each other and enhance each other.
> May our vows be congruent, and our desires shared.[20]

It does not matter how many steps a man and a woman take together. Even one step together can have *saha*, the togetherness of friendship, as its only foundation.

4

The Power of the Truth of Love

Savitri

While the *Mahabharata* does not dismiss the truth of desire, it demonstrates most powerfully in the person of Savitri that the truth of love that is not just desire, has an infinitely greater power and can conquer even death.[1]

King Ashvapati was a good king, devoted in every way to the good of the people. But he was childless, and for that reason he was an unhappy man; the older he grew, the more desperate he became: he needed an heir who would inherit the kingdom after him. For eighteen years he undertook many severe penances, praying to the goddess Savitri day and night. Eventually the goddess was pleased and appeared in person to him. Ashvapati sought from her a boon, that he be blessed with a child, a son, who would keep his family line unbroken. The goddess said that he would indeed be blessed with a child, but she would be a daughter and not a son, and that he should neither be disappointed nor protest in any way.[2]

Accordingly a daughter was born to Ashvapati and his wife, a Malava princess. Because she was born as a blessing from the goddess the child was named Savitri after her.[3] A beautiful child, she grew into a beautiful young woman, with a personality that was even more striking than her beauty. Her father was now a very worried man, but for another reason: no one had yet sought Savitri's hand in marriage. One day he said to her:

1. Her life is narrated in the *Vana-parva*, Chs. 293–299.
2. *Vana-parva*, 293.5–17.
3. Ibid., 293.24.

It is time for you to marry; but no one has so far made a proposal to me in that regard.[4]

Without actually saying it, the father was suggesting that her personality was so resplendent that most young men felt dishearteningly inferior to her, and were too intimidated to seek her as wife, and it was not likely, nor imminent, that anybody would. The best thing for her to do was:

Yourself choose a man who would be worthy of you in every respect.[5]

After you have made your choice, tell me about his background: giving good thought to it, I will marry you to him.[6]

Blessed daughter of mine, *kalyani*, I have heard it said that 'a father who does not, on his daughter coming to age, give her away in marriage: a husband who does not cohabit with his wife during her natural time: and a son who does not take care of a widowed mother—all these invite severe blame.[7]

So that I do not in the eyes of the gods appear as one fallen from his duty as father, do not take too long to choose for yourself a husband.[8]

Embarrassed no doubt by what her father had suggested to her, Savitri, in the company of some elderly ministers commanded by the king to ensure her safety and comfort, set out on her travels without any definite plan—but in the hope that she would somewhere, during her long travels find a man she would love and want to marry. She did.

Returning home after her long travels, she found her father, the king, seated in court, with a special visitor—the sage Narada, a peripatetic sage whose curiosity knew no bounds, and who therefore carried with him a treasury of information. On seeing Savitri, the sage asked Ashvapati:

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4. Ibid., 293.32.
5. Ibid., 293.32.
6. Ibid., 293.33.
7. Ibid., 293.34–35.
8. Ibid., 293.36.

Where is your daughter coming from? She is now a young woman, and you should think of finding for her a suitable match, shouldn't you?[9]

Ashvapati told Narada that that was indeed the purpose of her travels. He next asked Savitri to describe in detail the man she might have chosen to be her husband. Thereupon Savitri spoke thus:

Savitri (to her father)

There was in the Shalva territory a famous king, Dyumatsena, who lost his eyes and taking advantage of his disability, a neighbouring king dispossessed him of his kingdom. Dyumatsena and his wife with their son, then only a child, made a home for themselves in a forest. Their son, Satyavan, although born in a town, was reared in that forest. I have chosen Satyavan as my husband.[10]

Hearing this, Narada said to the king that, in choosing Satyavan, Savitri had brought upon herself the greatest of harms although without knowing it.[11]

A conversation between an anxious father and a reputedly all-knowing sage then followed: the father naturally wanting to know the kind of person Satyavan was, and Narada reciting the rare qualities Satyavan had.[12] Like his parents, he was given to *satya*, truth, and hence his name Satyavan. Glowing with energy like the sun; in wisdom, like the sage Brihaspati; brave and courageous, like the god Indra; Satyavan was as forbearing as the earth. In generosity, like the king Yayati; in giving, like Rantideva; Satyavan was self-controlled, gentle, full of friendliness for all, and modest. Like the moon in looks, he was one of the handsomest of men, indeed he could be one of the twins of the Ashvinikumara-s. In brief, in everything and at all times Satyavan was rooted in simplicity and freedom from *arjavam*, deviousness.

Somewhat skeptical that a single person could have all these rare qualities together, and now also greatly puzzled by Narada declaring

9. Ibid., 294.4.
10. Ibid., 294.7–10.
11. Ibid., 294.11.
12. Ibid., 294.12, 15, 17–20.

Savitri's choice of Satyavan as 'most unfortunate', her father asked him whether there was at the same time also some defect in Satyavan.[13] Narada answered:

> Yes, there *is*, only one defect, which obscures all his rare qualities, moreover, it is a defect that *cannot* be overcome.
>
> In one year from today, completing his short life, Satyavan will die.[14]

Stunned on hearing this, Ashvapati told Savitri:

> Savitri! Sage Narada, respected by the gods, is saying that Satyavan is short-lived and will die in one year from today. This defect suppresses all his other qualities.
>
> Make another choice, dear daughter.[15]

Savitri had heard the whole conversation between her father and Narada.

Savitri (to her father)

> Whether Satyavan is long-lived or short-lived, a man of qualities or of no qualities, I have chosen him as my husband, and shall make no other choice.
>
> A woman truly chooses only once.
>
> What is decided from one's heart, is then expressed in words, and then acted upon. In this matter, my heart is my sole authority.[16]

Greatly struck by the resoluteness of her character, Narada advised Ashvapati to marry Savitri to Satyavan; for nothing now, not even the prediction of her becoming a widow in one year, could sway her from the choice she had made, and Satyavan was after all a man of qualities that were not to be seen in any other man. Ashvapati proceeded with the arrangements to be made for the wedding, the very first step being his calling upon Satyavan's parents with the proposal. Not as a king, but as a girl's father, Ashvapati, with Savitri,

13. Ibid., 294.21.
14. Ibid., 294. 22–23.
15. Ibid., 294. 24–25.
16. Ibid., 294.27–28.

in the company of the family elders and some priests, walked on foot to the hermitage of Dyumatsena, Satyavan's father, who was himself once a king but had fallen on adverse days. On hearing the proposal,

Dyumatsena (to Ashvapati)

> Deprived of our kingdom, dependent upon this forest, we now live like ascetics, not an easy life. Your daughter Savitri deserves a better future. No, she must not be subjected to the rigours of a life in the forest that she may not be able to endure, and we have nothing better to offer her.[17]

Ashvapati (to Dyumatsena)

> That pleasure and pain, happiness and sorrow, come into existence and then pass, this I and my daughter know. I have come to you with this most earnest request that you accept her for your son Satyavan and as your daughter-in-law. Do not turn me away disappointed, for I have come to you with loving expectations.[18]

He had gone there also with an unhappy foreknowledge concealed in his heart, about Satyavan dying in a year from now. On his part, Dyumatsena revealed how, on hearing about Savitri, he had long cherished the wish to obtain her for his son Satyavan as his wife, but in view of their poor circumstances he did not think that to be ever possible. What he had wished for long was now going to happen.[19]

Savitri and Satyavan were married in the presence of all those who lived in that hermitage. The wedding took place not in a royal palace with all its pretensions but in a forest with the simple blessings of Nature all around. Satyavan glowed with joy at having Savitri as his wife; she, happy to have Satyavan as the husband her heart had chosen. No sooner had her father left than Savitri discarded the clothes of a princess and dressed herself in the clothes of the hermitage, making that transition with perfect ease and with joy within. Given her caring manners, her humility, her gentle speech, her competence in matters practical, it was not long before she had endeared herself

17. Ibid., 295.9.
18. Ibid., 295.10–12.
19. Ibid., 295. 13–14.

greatly to her parents-in-law and others. And with the same qualities she devoted herself to her husband, living their life in the togetherness of marriage, their love for each other, their sanctuary.[20]

But not a moment passed, day or night, when Savitri did not recall Narada's forecast about Satyavan dying in a year's time, and she seemed to be dissolving slowly in that fearful anxiety.[21] Satyavan knew nothing about it, for she had not told him; for there was, deep within her, also an assurance that Satyavan cannot die, Satyavan must not die. Yet, she kept count of each passing day.[22]

When, according to the calendar of the forecast, it seemed to her that it would be on the fourth remaining day of the year that Satyavan would die, Savitri undertook a very severe form of penance during the three preceding days: she stood, day and night, without food or water. Without knowing why she was doing it, Dyumatsena was distressed at what she had undertaken, and said to her:

> Daughter of a king! You have begun a severe penance. It is exceedingly difficult for you to remain without food or water.[23]

'Do not worry about me, dear father! I shall complete what I have undertaken. Steady resolve alone helps, and I began this', Savitri replied to her father-in-law. 'In that case', Dyumatsena said to her, 'may you complete it without any obstruction. And this is all that I can say.'[24] Savitri stood, unmoved, like a piece of dried wood. The day passed, the night passed, Savitri thinking 'tomorrow my husband is going to die', and, thinking that, felt within her a searing grief. But she also felt deep within her what was only a *feeling*, unclear, vague, but strong still, and which grew stronger with each passing moment, that she was preparing herself not just for the death of the man she loved, but also for something else, she did not know what.

But she was not alone. All those around her, including the many ascetics living in that forest, without knowing the purpose for which she had undertaken the three-day *vrata*, gave her their blessings:

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20. Ibid., 295. 15–22.
21. Ibid., 295.23.
22. Ibid., 296.2.
23. Ibid., 296.5.
24. Ibid., 295.6–7.

'may the purpose of your *vrata* be fulfilled.' In the silence of her being, she interpreted their blessings as '*and so it shall be*', '*evamastu*'.[25] On the next day, the fourth, at the completion of her *vrata*, Dhyumatsena said to Savitri, 'it is now time for you to break your three-day fast, and eat.' Savitri said: 'Yes, I will, but only when the dusk has fallen, only *after* I have fulfilled my aim, for that is the vow I had made in my heart.'[26] Something momentous was to happen at the hour of the dusk.

Just when the two were engaged in that brief conversation, Satyavan arrived, his axe on his shoulder, ready to go and collect for the household wood from the forest, as was his daily routine.

Savitri (to Satyavan)

Today I shall come with you. I will not let you go alone *today*.[27]

Satyavan (to Savitri)

You have never been to the woods before. The paths there are not easy. Moreover, you have been on a fast, you have not eaten for three days, and are therefore weak. You wouldn't be able to walk.[28]

Savitri (to Satyavan)

I feel neither weak nor tired. I am most enthusiastic to see the woods. Please do not say 'no' to me.[29]

Satyavan (to Savitri)

Very well, if you are so enthusiastic about seeing the woods, then come. But first take the permission of father and mother, for I would not want to be blamed later.[30]

25. Ibid., 296. 12–13.
26. Ibid., 296. 16–17.
27. Ibid., 296.19.
28. Ibid., 296.20.
29. Ibid., 296.21.
30. Ibid., 296.22.

Savitri (to her parents-in-law)

> Should you permit me, I so much want to go to the woods today with my husband. *Today*, I will not be able to bear separation from him even for a moment. It will not be right for me to prevent him from going, for I know he has to collect, like everyday, wood and flowers for the daily worship of fire.
>
> Besides, it is just a little less than a year that I came here, and I have not stepped out of the hermitage. Today I have this strong desire to see this forest, full of flowers.[31]

None of them, Satyavan included, could have understood her emphasis on *today.* None of them knew what she knew. And if they noticed that emphasis, which they could not have missed without being totally insensitive, they would have thought of it as nothing more than her womanly way of expressing a strong desire not only to be with her husband but also to see something of the forest she had not seen before. That how often is the true import of an emphasis missed in daily human transactions, is what the *Mahabharata* brings up in many different contexts.

Dyumatsena said:

> I do not recall, ever since Savitri's father gave her to us as our daughter-in-law, her making a single request to me. She wishes to see the forest. Go, dear daughter, and take care in the path of Satyavata.[32]

Savitri would do very much more.

Seemingly happy on the surface, even laughing, now that she was out in the woods for the first time with her beloved husband, Savitri burned in the fire of anxiety within. She was outwardly taking great joy in seeing many marvellous scenes: peacocks dancing in a group, different kinds of trees laden with fruit, exquisite flowers with colours of different hues, the river with its sparkling fresh water. Satyavan would draw her attention to something special, saying: 'Savitri! Look, how very beautiful that is!' She would pay attention to it, but Narada's

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31. Ibid., 296.23–26.
32. Ibid., 296.27–28.

words were ringing in her ears at the same time.[33] 'It is as if her heart was divided into two: with the one, she was following her husband; with the other, she was waiting with dread for the moment he would die that day.'[34]

As Satyavan was chopping some wood, he began to feel tired as never before. He said to Savitri:

> I have a severe headache, a great pain in all my limbs, and my heart is burning. My dearest, I think I am ill. I feel as if my head is being pierced with many arrows. I want to sleep. I do not have the strength left even to stand.[35]

Savitri quickly sat down on the ground and took her husband's head in her lap. She then began to combine the day with the exact moment when Narada's prediction about Satyavan would happen. Hardly had she finished that astrological calculation than she saw standing near Satyavan a god-like being wearing red clothes, his eyes were red, he had a crown on his head and a cord in his hand. He looked fierce, yet he glowed like the sun; he could have been the Sun-god himself, looking intently at Satyavan who had by now passed into what seemed a deep sleep. On seeing him, Savitri gently placed Satyavan's head on the ground, stood up and with folded hands and anguish in her voice addressed that being thus: 'I reckon that you are some god, for your body is different from that of the humans. Should you be pleased, would you tell me who you are, and what you want to do here?'[36]

That god-like being answered: 'Savitri! Know me as Yama, the Lord of Death! Your husband Satyavan's life-span has come to its end. I have come to claim him.'[37]

Satyavan was dead.

Then began a living mortal's, a woman's, dialogue with the Lord of Death—a miracle, for there *is* no dialogue with Death.

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33. Ibid., 296.29–32.
34. Ibid., 296.33.
35. Ibid., 297.3–5.
36. Ibid., 297. 6–11.
37. Ibid., 297.12–13, 17–18.

Savitri (to Yama)

I have heard it said that ordinarily it is your messengers who come to take away the mortals. This time, Lord, how have you come *yourself*?[38]

Yama (to Savitri)

This Satyavan was rooted in truth, and possessed rare qualities in a still rarer combination. He was not to be taken away like other mortals by my messengers. For *him*, I had to come myself.[39]

It was a most remarkable opening of a mortal's dialogue with the Lord of Death. For it established from the outset an easy relationship between the two. The woman had lived in the darkest shadow of Yama for a whole year. Knowing that she would have to encounter him before long, she had still chosen out of love as her husband a man Yama would claim at the end of the year. And Yama knew it. Every mortal would die one day or another, but, extracting life from Satyavan in the presence of a wife such as Savitri, the Lord of Death had to make it a privileged death as well.

Savitri was not the kind of woman to be flattered by that. In death, all are alike, a saint no more 'privileged' than a sinner. Neither was she fearful of the Lord of Death. Inexpressible grief she undoubtedly felt, but not terror of death. In keeping count of the passing days of the one-year left to Satyavan, she had lived in that grief already; and with him she had been dying too. The final scene was familiar, experienced in advance; but being the kind of person she was, Savitri breathed into the 'familiar' a spirit even the Lord of Death was not familiar with.

Binding with the cord of mortality the life that was Satyavan, Yama rose in the air and moved southwards into the space, taking that particular life, that *jiva*, into the land of the dead. Savitri followed Yama.[40] Soon thereafter, the following dialogue took place between the two.

38. Ibid., 297.14.
39. Ibid., 297.16.
40. Ibid., 297.19.

Yama (to Savitri)

Savitri! Now go back, and do the last rites for what was Satyavan. You have discharged your husband-debt. You are now free. You have followed your husband as far as you should have.[41]

Savitri (to Yama)

Where my husband is being taken, or is going himself, there I should go too. That is the abiding *dharma*. By your grace, and with the strength of my love for my husband, nothing can obstruct my way.[42]

The wise say that on walking even seven steps together, a friendship is established. From such friendship I shall say to you a few things, which I would like you kindly to listen.[43]

A mortal, a woman, was claiming friendship with Death. And from that ground of friendship, she started a conversation with Death, which was not about death but about life, about relationships, of the self with the self, and of the self with the *other*. Travelling with death, seeking life.

Savitri (to Yama)

Those who have not disciplined their mind and their senses, it is no good for them to live in a forest, or perform sacred rites, or undertake some rigorous practice. It is through deep reflection that one comes to understand *dharma*, and it is to *dharma* that the saintly give principal place.[44]

One *dharma* is adequate to take one to that common goal of understanding and knowledge, and therefore one should not flit to a second, and then to a third, *dharma*. It is to *dharma* as such that the saintly give the principal place.[45]

Yama (to Savitri)

Now go back. The things that you have said, in such a perfect combination of word, tone, diction, and logic, have pleased me

41. Ibid., 297.20.
42. Ibid., 297.21–22.
43. Ibid., 297.23.
44. Ibid., 297.24.
45. Ibid., 297.25.

very much. Excepting the life of Satyavan, I can give you everything else.[46]

Savitri (to Yama)

My father-in-law, deprived of his kingdom, now lives dependent on a forest, and has become blind too. I pray that by your grace his eyesight is restored to him, and regaining his strength, he may again shine like the sun.[47]

Yama (to Savitri)

What you have wished shall happen in that very way, I give you this boon. I see that you are very tired. Go back now, and do not put yourself to the rigour of further travel.[48]

Savitri (to Yama)

Being near my husband I feel this travel no rigour. Wherever you take him, I shall come there too. And now I have something more to say. Listen![49]

Even a fleeting time with those rooted in truth is greatly desirable, their friendship even more. It is said that the company of such people is never in vain. Therefore one should always seek their nearness.[50]

Yama (to Savitri)

What you have said is to the good of all, most pleasing to me, and conducive to enriching the learned and the wise. Excepting the life of Satyavan, ask a second boon.[51]

Savitri (to Yama)

The second boon I seek from you is that the lost kingdom of my father-in-law Dyumatsena is restored to him, and he, who I venerate as my guru, may never swerve from the path of *dharma*.[52]

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46. Ibid., 297.26.
47. Ibid., 297.27.
48. Ibid., 297.28.
49. Ibid., 297.29.
50. Ibid., 297.30.
51. Ibid., 297.31.
52. Ibid., 297.32.

Yama (to Savitri)

Dyumatsena will soon regain his kingdom and without struggle, and he will never swerve from the path of *dharma.* This second wish of yours granted also, now go back, and do not tire yourself more.[53]

Savitri (to Yama)

You keep all living beings within bounds of an eternal discipline (*yama*) and therefore, Deva, you are universally known as Yama. Listen to what I will say.

In acts, speech, and thoughts, not to bear enmity towards any being; to have compassion for all; and giving; are considered the abiding *dharma* of the good.

Generally the people of this world are short-lived, and human helplessness is well known. Therefore saints like you show compassion even to an enemy seeking refuge.[54]

Yama (to Savitri)

Blessed one! Hearing you say this is to me like water to the thirsty. Excepting for the life of Satyavan, ask whatever you wish.[55]

Savitri (to Yama)

My father, King Ashvapati, has no son. May he be blessed with his own hundred sons who will continue his family line. This is the third boon I seek from you.[56]

Yama (to Savitri)

Blessed one! Your father will have a hundred sons that will keep his family line unbroken. Princess! Your third wish has also been granted. Now go back. You have already come very far.[57]

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53. Ibid., 297.33.
54. Ibid., 297.34–36.
55. Ibid., 297.37.
56. Ibid., 297.38.
57. Ibid., 297.39.

Savitri (to Yama)

Near my husband, no place can be too far. In my mind I float even farther. However, in passing, listen to me.

Vaivasva, the Sun god, being your father, you are called also Vaivasvat. Since you rule over all living beings with perfect equality,[58] in accordance with *dharma*, you are called Dharmaraja.

Human beings do not trust even themselves as they trust the saints.

It is from love that trust arises; and because the saints have love for all, people have trust in them.[59]

Yama (to Savitri)

Blessed one! What you have said, that I have not heard before except from you. It gives me great satisfaction. Excepting the life of Satyavan, ask for a fourth boon, and go back.[60]

Savitri (to Yama)

May I with Satyavan have a hundred sons who, brave and courageous, will continue our family line. This is the fourth boon I seek from you, Lord of Death.[61]

And the Lord of Death granted that wish of Savitri as well. 'You will have a hundred sons, brave and courageous, who will enhance your happiness.' 'Now go back', he said to her, 'and do not tire yourself more. You have already come very far.'[62]

While floating with Death, Savitri still had a sense of space and time in which man's life is measured. It is only that Yama, taking increasing joy in a mortal's conversation with him, had for a moment forgotten that he held in his hands the extinguished life of that mortal's husband, which made the fourth boon coming true problematic. Savitri, of course, saw it, and quickly, but seemed in no hurry to bring up the clear implication, nor in a hurry to press the advantage.

58. In death, all are equal.
59. *Vana-parva*, 297.40–43.
60. Ibid., 297.44.
61. Ibid., 297.45.
62. Ibid., 297.46.

Travelling with Death, a mortal must not be in a hurry. Savitri had something more to say.

Savitri (to Yama)

Always rooted in *dharma*, the *santa*, saints, are never troubled in mind, nor are they ever distressed. Being with them is never in vain. Neither do those who are good, fear them ever.

With the power of truth, the saints keep the sun on its course, and sustain the earth. It is from the saints that the present, the past, and the future derive their support. Being with the saintly, people do not suffer.

Given to the good of the others, selflessly, the saints do not look upon each other with narrow concerns of the self.

The blessings of the saints are never in vain. Nobody feels reduced by the saints, nor does anybody's self-interest suffer. In the nearness of the saints the three get united: blessings, self-esteem, and self-interest. The saints are thus the protectors of the world.[63]

Yama (to Savitri)

The more you speak, and say in words most elegant, things that have deep meaning and are agreeable to the mind and the heart, the greater grow my feelings of *bhakti* for you. Ask from me, therefore, some exceptional boon.[64]

A mortal, a woman, had made the Lord of Death express *feelings*. That was a miracle; for Death has no *feelings*, can have no *feelings* if it has to do its appointed work impartially. Feelings belong to the world of mortality. The greater miracle was that he had for her feelings, not of pity, not even of compassion, but of *bhakti*, reverential devotion. *Bhakti*, in its proper meaning, normally flowed from a mortal to a god; here it was flowing in a reverse direction.

Savitri (to Yama)

You have bestowed upon me the boon of having a hundred sons of my own. That cannot come true without my union with my

63. Ibid., 297.47–50.
64. Ibid., 297.51.

husband, whose life you are taking away. Therefore I seek from you this last boon that Satyavan be restored to life, for without him I am like dead.

Should there be a pleasure that could be had without him, I have no desire for such pleasure. Without my husband I have no desire for the prosperities of the world, nor any desire for heavenly existence. Without him I do not even wish to live.

Granting me the boon of my having hundred sons, you are still taking away my husband. So that your word shall come true, grant me this boon that Satyavan lives again.[65]

Saying *tathastu*, 'that shall be so', Yama released Satyavan from the cord of mortality. That was the greatest miracle. The Lord of Death then spoke to Savitri thus:

Here! I have released your husband. Your words suffused with *dharma* have given me greatest satisfaction. Satyavan is free of all ailments. With you he will live now for four hundred years, and will be known in the world for his living in *dharma*.

From you, Satyavan will have a hundred sons, who will be known by *your* name—Savitra.[66]

In the next instant, Savitri effortlessly floated back to where she had left Satyavan dead. She again put his head in her lap. Satyavan had risen from the dead. Slowly he opened his eyes, as one would after a deep sleep, and said to Savitri:

Dearest! It looks as if I slept for long. Why didn't you wake me up? And who was that dark-complexioned being who was dragging me?[67]

'Yes, you slept in my arms for long', Savitri said to Satyavan:

That dark-complexioned being was Yama who keeps the world within bounds, but he is now gone.

Feeling rested after sleeping well, if you feel strong enough, get up, for the darkness of the night is becoming deeper, and we have to go home.

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65. Ibid., 297.52–54.
66. Ibid., 297.55–59.
67. Ibid., 297.65.

Satyavan got up, and recounting the sequence of what happened to him till he went into that deep sleep akin to unconsciousness and saw that being, he asked Savitri: 'What *was* it? A dream, or was it reality? If you know something about it, tell me.'[68]

'The night is deepening. I will tell you all I know about it in the morning tomorrow', Savitri said.

What she said furthermore was that she felt frightened by the sounds of wild animals.[69] The woman the Lord of Death could not frighten was frightened by the sounds of wild animals of the forest!

On Satyavan saying that, covered with deep darkness the woods appeared frightening, and she would neither be able to see the way nor be able to walk, Savitri tried to seduce her husband a little. 'May we not, if you like, spend the night in the woods? I will make a small fire for you.'[70]

But now Satyavan was seized with painful anxiety about the condition his parents would certainly be in, for it was already very dark in the night and their son and daughter-in-law had not returned home. One remarkable characteristic of the *Mahabharata* is that, even in the midst of high philosophy of the human condition, it does not lose touch with the ordinary, and thereby with the truth as experienced in the daily expressions of life. Which parent, father or mother, has not known the pain of anxiety at the son, or the daughter, or the daughter-in-law, not returning home at the expected hour, and then often imagining the worst?

Satyavan (to Savitri)

> Never before have I returned so late to the ashrama. After the dusk falls, my mother won't let me go out anywhere. If I stray far from home even during the day, my father and mother get worried on my account, and start inquiring from the nearby ashrama-s as to where I might be. My mother once scolded me, 'you return home late'. And on another occasion, both of them, in anguished voice, said to me, 'both of us are old, one of us blind: we depend on you for our very survival.'

68. Ibid., 297.66–72.
69. Ibid., 297.75–76.
70. Ibid., 297.78–81.

> We must reach home as quickly as possible; for I fear that their anxiety about us might even kill them. Savitri dearest, I tell you, should that happen I wouldn't be able to live either. I now curse this sleep into which I fell. It has put my mother's life in danger; for I know how anxious she must be about our safety, she might even think that I am dead. And I know that my blind father is going from one ashrama to another, my old and frail mother following him, to inquire if anybody knows where we might be. Savitri, with your grace I want to see without any further delay my father and mother. Although I felt dreadfully ill, I am now not worried about myself but about them.[71]

Saying this, Satyavan melted into tears, and Savitri felt greatly distressed. The pain of anxiety of the kind Satyavan described was now as distressing to her as was his death. He knew nothing of the pain of foreknowledge about him that she had lived with for a year. He knew even less of her pain of living in that foreknowledge alone, keeping it from those she loved. And of course he knew nothing of Savitri travelling with the Lord of Death to have him unbound from the cord of mortality. That miracle did not annul, though, her previous pain; for being in the past, it was made absolute in having been experienced. The *Mahabharata* shows how one's pain is because of the pain of the *other:* Satyavan's pain at the pain of anxiety of his father and mother, which he knew as certain and did not just imagine, and Savitri's fresh pain for both. To reassure Satyavan, wiping his tears she spoke to him thus:

> If I have ever done *tapasya* in its true discipline, *given* in its true spirit, then may this night be blessed both for my mother-in-law and father-in-law and blessed for my husband.
>
> I cannot recall ever resorting to untruth even in lighthearted banter. From that strength of truth, may my parents-in-law be safe and well.[72]

With Satyavan appealing to her in most pathetic words that they return home as fast as possible, Savitri arose, tied her hair in a firm knot, and helped him to his feet, for he was still weak. Resting his arm on her shoulder, she held him close. They were on their way.

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71. Ibid., 297.83–95.
72. Ibid., 297-97–99.

Meanwhile the first boon Savitri had asked of the Lord of Death, and was granted, had come true. Satyavan's father, Dyumatsena, had regained his eyesight. Those who saw it were astonished beyond belief. But *he* didn't seem even to be aware of it, the joy of the miracle totally obscured by his mounting anxiety as to the safety of Satyavan and Savitri. Dyumatsena and his wife Shaivya, increasingly desperate, moved from one hermitage to another, and there were many in that vast forest, looking for the two everywhere, only to be disappointed. Like two demented persons, Dyumatsena and his wife, both old and infirm, and now in tears, were calling out, 'Satyavan! Savitri! Where *are* you?' Every sound of human footsteps they heard, they imagined it to be theirs, saying to each other, with pathetic certainty, 'with Savitri, Satyavan is coming.'[73]

No story in the *Mahabharata*, narrated in answer to a certain inquiry concerning life and relationships, and having a distinct focus, is ever single-layered or one-dimensional. Side by side with the miraculous, exists the ordinary. The miraculous was unknown, even to Satyavan, who had actually died and then risen from the dead; the ordinary, the familiar, like someone late in coming home and those at home not knowing why, had roused the familiar fears and emotions, through which a certain quality of relationship was being demonstrated. The miracle of Savitri is not to be separated, therefore, from the anguished concern of Satyavan for his old parents, and from the latter's desperate anxiety about their son and daughter-in-law.

For them, it was a most joyous miracle when Savitri and Satyavan, his arm still on her shoulder, and she holding him close, reached home in the next few moments. Dyumatsena's joy would have been no less if he were still blind; only it was so much the greater now, his eyesight restored, on being able to also see his son and his daughter-in-law. Again, it was through the ordinary, the familiar of everyday life—the questioning as to the reason(s) for coming home late[74]—that the miracle of Savitri comes to be known. Satyavan

73. Ibid., 298.1–9.
74. Ibid., 298.27–29.

attributed their worrisome late-coming to the reasons he knew: his going to the forest with Savitri, his most painful headache while collecting wood, his passing into a deep sleep on account of that pain, his sleeping for a long time, his waking when the night had set in and it had become dark, and his walking back home through that thick darkness so that his parents might not be distressed by their absence.[75]

But something else still remained to be explained—the miracle of Dyumatsena regaining his eyesight. The great sage Gautama, one among the many sages living in that forest who had gathered round Dyumatsena and his wife Shaivya to comfort them, said to Satyavan: 'Of that, you have no knowledge. Maybe Savitri can tell us.'[76] Turning to her, he said: 'Savitri! I want to hear its secret from *you*. Unless there is in it something you will not like to say, tell us the truth.'[77]

Savitri

No, there is nothing that I would like to conceal. I will tell you what happened. Listen!

Sage Narada had predicted to me that Satyavan would die at the end of the year. I knew *today* was the day when Satyavan must die. That was the reason I did not want him to go to the forest alone, and I went with him.

Suddenly he complained of a most painful headache and passed into a deep sleep. I saw the Lord of Death, Yama, arrive, and after extinguishing Satyavan's life, floating southwards.

In words of truth I sang adoration to Yama, and he blessed me with the five boons I sought: My father-in-law would regain his eyesight *and* his kingdom; my father would have a hundred sons; and so will *I*, and, as the fifth boon I obtained from the Lord of Death, my husband Satyavan would live for four hundred years.[78]

Savitri's narration was as brief and factual as that. Satyavan learnt that he had on that day actually died, but Savitri, his wife, had

75. Ibid., 298.30–32.
76. Ibid., 298–33.
77. Ibid., 298.35.
78. Ibid., 298.36–41.

brought about the miracle of having him unbound from Death's cord of mortality. There was much that was left out by her, and there was no untruth in her doing so, only modesty—that it was *not* by her singing adoration of the Lord of Death but by her saying things he had never heard before, and his growing *bhakti* for the kind of person she was, that she had, with marvellous ease, wrenched her husband from Death's hands.

The *Mahabharata* was simultaneously making an overwhelming declaration *Satyavan cannot die:* at its deepest level also a metaphor. This too, in the course of the ordinary, the familiar experience of everyday life—one receiving, in the midst of some dreadful anxiety, assurance from many that everything is well, that everything *shall* be well. Not just conventional words spoken out of goodwill, but assurance coming from those living in *dharma* and truth, and for that reason the more assuring. On seeing the pitiable condition of Dyumatsena and his wife, because their son and daughter-in-law had not returned home from the woods and it was already night and very dark, and they were imagining the worst, the sages of greatest repute living in that forest: Suvarcha, Gautama, Bharadvaj, Dalbhya, Apastamba, and Dhaumya had reassured them: *Satyavan lives. Savitri with him, Satyavan cannot die.*

Suvarcha

On seeing Satyavan's wife Savitri, who glows with her *tapas*, conquest of her self and good conduct, I can say *Satyavan lives.*[79]

Gautama

I have studied all the Veda-s with their six accessories; I have practised many rigorous austerities; from my youth I have lived in sexual continence, and in that state have been devoted to my teachers; whatever *vrata* I undertook, and I did many, I completed with single mindedness. From the powers all these have given me, I can know the condition of others. You can therefore believe in the truth of what I say: *Satyavan lives.*[80]

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79. Ibid., 298.10.
80. Ibid., 298.11–13.

Bharadvaj

On seeing Satyavan's wife Savitri, who glows with her *tapas*, conquest of her self and good conduct, I can say *Satyavan lives.*[81]

Dalbhya

That you have regained your eyesight; that Savitri undertook that *vrata*; and that she went with her husband without even eating anything: considering all these, it is certain *Satyavan lives.*[82]

Dhaumya

Because he is endowed with the greatest of qualities, is beloved of the people, has all the signs of a person with long life, it can be said: your son *Satyavan lives.*[83]

Savitri with him, Satyavan cannot die is the *Mahabharata*'s universal metaphor for the truth of a love that had conquered death.

81. Ibid., 298.16.
82. Ibid., 298.17.
83. Ibid., 298.19.

Damayanti

The *Mahabharata* narrates the story of Damayanti and her husband King Nala in answer to Yudhishthira's personal question about his most distressing situation. Cheated in a fraudulently played game of dice; done out of what was legitimately his kingdom; sent into exile with his four brothers and their wife; reduced to a nobody; exposed to a life of extreme hardship in the forest, Yudhishthira asked a visiting sage if there lived or ever had been, any man more miserable and cursed than he? Narrated by the sage Brihadshva, who had come calling on the exiled Pandava-s, the story of Damayanti and Nala is a long story[1] of seemingly endless tortuous misfortunes one upon the other, of human fortitude and, above all, of the undying power of love.

Rich with metaphorical meanings, of the many things the *Mahabharata* is suggesting to us through the lives of Damayanti and Nala, the two that are clearly stated in the text itself are:

> *In the face of even the most trying circumstances of life, women of good breeding protect themselves by the power of their own Self, conquering thereby truth and the heavens, too: of this, there is no doubt.*[2]
>
> *When daiva, the providence, appears to be against, and purushartha, self-effort, bears no fruit, men living in truth do not grieve, nor lose heart.*[3]

Nala was the king of the Nishadha country. Damayanti was the princess of the kingdom of Vidharbha. Damayanti, described in most

1. Spread over chapters 53 to 79 of the *Vana-parva* of the *Mahabharata.*
2. *Vana-parva,* 70.8 and 74.25.
3. Ibid., 79–14.

lyrical words[4] came to be known as a woman of such extraordinary radiant beauty, the like of which had never been seen, or heard of, on this earth, or even in paradise.[5] Nala himself was the handsomest of men and looked like Kamadeva incarnate in human form.[6] Both were equally known for their great moral qualities.

People close to them would playfully but truthfully praise Damayanti to Nala and Nala to Damayanti, again and again. The expected result was that, without seeing each other, they fell deliriously in love, in absentia as it were, their desire for each other increasing with each passing day. Unable to bear or conceal the pangs of desire for Damayanti, Nala would withdraw into a corner of his palace garden, and brood. One day he saw some beautiful white swans with golden-hued wings descend there. As he caught one of them, the bird said to him: 'King! Do not kill me. I will do something for you that will please you. I will fly to Damayanti and praise you to her in such words that she will not entertain the thought of any other man, ever.'[7] The king let the bird go, and the swan with its other companions flew to where Damayanti was, surrounded by her *sakhi*-s, women friends. Struck with wonder at seeing these beautiful birds descend near her, Damyanti ran after one, and then the other, trying to catch at least one. One of them spoke to Damayanti in a human voice:

The Swan (to Damayanti)

Damayanti! Listen! There is in the country of Nishadha its king called Nala. He looks like one of the twin gods Ashvini. Indeed he appears to be Kamadeva himself incarnate, and there is among men none like him. Most highly esteemed for his qualities, no king is more magnificent than he. We have seen gods, and men of every variety, of every tribe, but we have not seen any other living being comparable to King Nala. Among the beautiful women of this earth, you are the rarest of jewels. If you choose Nala as your husband, both your beauty and life will be fulfilled. When

4. Ibid., 53.10–14.
5. Ibid., 53.14–15.
6. Ibid., 53.15, 27–28.
7. Ibid., 53.20–21.

a very special woman is united with a very special man, the result is especially blessed.[8]

Hearing this, Damayanti said to the Swan: 'Please take to Nala my return message, and say to him all that you said to me'; and that is what the Swan did.[9]

Meanwhile Damayanti was lovesick for Nala. In the narration of her condition, the *Mahabharata* describes the classical symptoms of lovesickness with perfect realism, in which nothing is exaggerated, nothing said in too high a tone.

Damayanti's mind was thereafter gripped with an unspoken grinding anxiety: her nature changed into a state of total helplessness: her body began to lose its natural glow: she grew thinner and weaker: and she would often breathe heavily.[10]

Her eyes turned upwards, she was mostly lost in the thought of Nala: she looked disheveled and mad: her body had turned pale: in her lovesickness she was every moment losing her power of judgement.[11]

Sleeping neither in the night nor in the day, she had lost all interest in the ordinary pleasures, and spent most of her time crying.[12]

These symptoms of lovesickness described by the *Mahabharata* do not seem to have changed much down the centuries, and are just as easily recognisable today.

Damayanti's *sakhi*-s quickly sensed her condition to have been caused by a young woman's sickness in love. Naturally worried about her, they went to her father, King Bhima of Vidharbha, and reported to him what he had himself noticed and had begun to wonder why his daughter looked so ill. There was no work suitable to her talents he could think of, and which he could entrust to her, if only to take her mind away from whatever was ailing her.[13] A father's

8. Ibid., 53.27–30.
9. Ibid., 53. 31–32.
10. Ibid., 54.2.
11. Ibid., 54.3.
12. Ibid., 54.4.
13. Ibid., 54.5–7.

natural instincts showed him the way: he should get her married, and thus also fulfill a father's obligation.

An invitation was sent by him to all the young kings and princes of that region, that there would be at his palace a *svayam-vara*, the ceremony where a woman chooses her life's partner. The news brought to Vidharbha many kings, each with a large army of the most impressive decorated elephants, horses, and men in their shining armour. They arrived at Kundinipur, King Bhima's capital, many days in advance of Damayanti's *svayam-vara*. They camped there for many days, each of them hoping that Damayanti would choose *him*.

But, Damayanti had already made her choice.

Meanwhile, hearing about the *svayam-vara* of 'Damayanti, a special jewel on the earth, who has by her beauty put in shade the most beautiful of women',[14] some of the gods decided that they should, each one of them, also try his luck to win Damayanti's hand in marriage. Led by Indra, they, like the kings, headed towards Kundinipur. On the way they met King Nala, who, already lovesick for Damayanti, was also going to her *svayam-vara*, hoping that she would choose him. Struck by his Kamadeva-like visage, they lost all hopes of winning Damayanti, but requested him nevertheless to help them by acting as their messenger. Overwhelmed by the gods seeking help from a mortal, Nala said: 'Yes, I promise I will help you. But who is the person to whom I have to go as your messenger, and what is the work you seek to achieve through me? Please say that clearly.'[15]

Introducing the other gods to him, Indra spoke: Please go to Damayanti and tell her that 'Indra, Agni (the Fire-god), Varuna (the god of Waters) and Yama (the Controller of Life and Death) are coming to see you. Choose one of them as your husband.'[16] On hearing this, Nala said: 'I have exactly the same purpose as yours; do not, therefore, send me as your messenger. Venerable gods, how can a man who is resolved to gain a woman, relinquish her to another? And please forgive me for saying so.'[17] Indra held Nala to his promise

14. Ibid., 54.20–21, 23.
15. Ibid., 55.1–2.
16. Ibid., 55.3–6.
17. Ibid., 55.7–8.

that he would help them and said that he could not renege on what he promised: 'Go fast! Do not delay!' Nala then put to Indra a practical problem he was bound to encounter in approaching Damayanti: 'Her inner apartments in the palace are heavily guarded. How will I gain entrance?' Indra assured him that he would, easily. And he did.

Nala who was seeing Damayanti for the first time, was rendered speechless with love and desire for her. On seeing him appear as a most marvellous apparition suddenly amidst them, and struck by his majestic bearing as much as by his Kamadeva-like beauty, Damayanti's maids got up from their seats respectfully.

Damayanti addressed him:

> Who *are* you? You have appeared here like some god, flawless in your visage, increasing the desires in my heart. I want to know who you are. How did you gain entrance here? I hope nobody saw you come in. This palace is heavily guarded, the king's rule exceedingly strict and the offenders punished without mercy.[18]

Nala replied:

> Know me as Nala. I have come here as a messenger of the gods, their message to you is: 'Indra, Agni, Varuna and Yama want to gain you. Choose one of them as your husband.'
>
> No, nobody could see me or obstruct me coming into the palace; for I have come here as a messenger of the gods, after all; and they made my entry perfectly easy. Hear their message, and decide as your mind prompts you.[19]

With the greatest respect to the gods, Damayanti then said to Nala:

> Ever since I heard what that white swan said to me about you, I have loved you, and my heart has been burning with my desire for you. *You* marry me, with the fullest assurance that whatever is mine will be yours also. I worship you, I will kill myself if you do not accept me.

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18. Ibid., 55.20–21.
19. Ibid., 55.22–25.

Hearing Damayanti say this, and of course overjoyed beyond expression, Nala felt at the same time honour bound that, having accepted to be the messenger of the gods, he should promote not *his* self-interest but theirs. He said to Damayanti:

> When the gods of the universe want to gain you, why should you in preference to them choose a mortal? I am nothing more than some dust under their feet. They have come for you; you should choose one of those gods. Which woman will not do so? I hear that if a mortal acts against the gods of the universe, he invites his death. Therefore, please save me by choosing one of them as your husband. You will be happy thereby. I say this to you as someone who wishes you well.[20]

With tears in her eyes, Damayanti said to Nala: 'Saluting all those gods of the universe, I choose *you* as my husband.'[21] Nala, having a strong sense of *dharma*, what is right and just, sincerely pleaded with Damayanti that he should not, in this situation, act dishonurably, and that she should help him keep his self-interest but with *dharma*, his equally strong desire for her but with honour.[22]

Her voice choked with overwhelming emotion, Damayanti said to Nala:

> I have found a flawless way of your achieving that, and in which no blame of any kind will fall upon you. You come together with the other gods to the pavilion where my *svayam-vara* is going to be held. In *their* presence I shall choose *you* as my husband. In this way no blame will attach to you.[23]

Nala returned to the gods and narrated to them the events as they had happened, reported what he had said to Damayanti, and what she had said to him in response.

> When I sang to Damayanti your glory and your might, she chose me as she had already resolved in her mind. Furthermore, she has invited you to her *svayam-vara* when in your presence she will choose me as her husband, she said. I have reported to you every

20. Ibid., 56.5–12.
21. Ibid., 56.13–14.
22. 56.15–17.
23. Ibid., 56.19–21.

thing truthfully. You are the evidence, *pramana*, of the inner truth of this whole thing.[24]

On the appointed auspicious day, King Bhima, Damayanti's father, invited the assembled kings to his daughter's *svayam-vara*, and they all came with utmost eagerness to the pavilion, dressed in exquisite clothes and wearing around their necks garlands of perfumed flowers and ornaments, all of them together looking like the stars in the sky. Damayanti arrived; and the introduction of the royal suitors began. Going slowly past them, Damayanti saw five men sitting together, all of them in every way looking alike, indistinguishable from each other. Which one of them was Nala? Damayanti couldn't recognise him; for each of the five looked like Nala. The four gods had played that trick. Unable to decide which of the five was a god and which Nala, Damayanti felt very discouraged and sad; even more so when she could not discern in those five men any of the attributes or signs by which, she had heard from her elders, gods were distinguished.[25]

She reckoned that the best thing to do was to appeal to the gods themselves. Her body shaking, tears in her eyes, with her hands folded in worshipful salutation Damayanti addressed the gods thus:

On hearing from the white swan about Nala, the king of Nishadha country, I have from my heart chosen him as my husband. With the power of that truth, may the gods reveal to me Nala.[26]

In thought, in speech, and in act, if I have never strayed from good conduct, by the power of that truth may the gods reveal to me Nala.[27]

If the gods of the universe have destined Nala to be my husband, by the power of that truth may the gods reveal to me Nala.[28]

If I have taken this resolve in the sincerest devotion to Nala, by the power of that truth may the gods reveal to me Nala.[29]

Great gods of the universe, show me who you are, so that I may recognise Nala.[30]

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24. Ibid., 56.28–31.
25. Ibid., 57.10–15.
26. Ibid., 57.16–17.
27. Ibid., 57.18.
28. Ibid., 57.19.
29. Ibid., 57.20
30. Ibid., 57.21

Deeply moved by what amounted to a mortal's cry of helplessness, and impressed even more by Damayanti's resolute decision, her unwavering love for Nala, her purity of heart in which there was no guile whatsoever, only fine intelligence, and her sincerest attachment to Nala, the gods gave her the insight by which she could know the signs that distinguished the gods.[31] Now Damayanti noticed that four of the five men had no sweat on their body, their eyelids didn't flutter, the flowers they were wearing were fresh with not a speck of dust on them, and their feet did not touch the ground while they were sitting. They were the gods. But among them there was one on whose body, drops of sweat could be seen, the flowers around his neck had somewhat wilted, his eyelids fluttered, and his feet touched the earth while he was seated. He was Nala the mortal. After getting a close look at them, the large-eyed Damayanti, holding one end of Nala's garment, put the *svayam-vara* garland around his neck. Thus did Damayanti choose her husband.[32]

Nala as the messenger of the gods had said to her: 'Which woman would not choose one of the gods in preference to a mortal'?

Damayanti was a different kind of woman.

On his part, with the greatest joy in his heart, Nala said to Damayanti:

> That you have chosen me in preference to the gods, an expression of rare love, I shall in every way be at your service always.[33]
>
> So long as there is breath in my body, you will have my abiding love: this I say to you truthfully and promise you.[34]

It is with these words that Nala gave Damayanti his troth.

Although the kings assembled there lamented in disappointment, the four gods gave Nala and Damayanti their blessings and each of them gave them two boons besides. Glowing with ineffable happiness, Nala and Damayanti were married; Nala stayed for a while at his father-in-law's house, and then returned to his own capital, now

31. Ibid., 57.22–23.
32. Ibid., 57.24–27.
33. Ibid., 57.31.
34. Ibid., 57.32.

Damayanti's home. Being a caring king, Nala looked after his people, creating conditions where people could be happy. Damayanti gave birth to two children, a son and a daughter, who were named Indrasen and Indrasena.

It is often said that the gods cannot bear too much human happiness: it is truer, though, that the humans themselves cannot bear too much human happiness. However, in the case of Damayanti and Nala it was Time, *Kali-yuga*, the Dark Age that could not bear that a mortal woman should have chosen in preference to the gods a mortal man, and that both were ecstatically happy.

When the gods were returning to their heavenly abodes after Damayanti's *svayam-vara*, they met Kali-yuga, hurrying to some place. On asking where he was going, he told them that, greatly desirous of Damayanti, he was going to attend her *svyam-vara*. Indra said to him: 'That *svayam-vara* is over, and in our presence Damayanti chose Nala.'[35] Greatly angered on hearing this, the Dark Age said to the gods: '*That Damayanti chose a mortal in the presence of the gods, requires exemplary punishment.*'[36]

The gods said to him: 'Damayanti chose Nala with our consent': 'Which woman will not choose him?' They then narrated the great moral qualities of the man; and said: 'Whoever, an idiot, chooses to curse a man like Nala would invite only his own ruin, and would fall into hell.'[37] Saying this, the gods left.

Kali-yuga persisted in his furious anger and confided to Dvapara, another division of Time, a preceding Age to Kali-yuga, less evil than Kali but troubled none the less, who was accompanying him: 'I cannot subdue my anger. I shall enter into Nala and destroy him'. He disclosed his plan to Dvapara: have Nala defeated in a game of dice and driven out of his kingdom that he would have lost, so that he would never again be able to have a blissful time with Damayanti. 'You will have to help me', he said to Dvapara.

Kali came to where Nala lived, waiting to find a fatally weak point in Nala, his Achilles' heel, so to say, from where he could enter

35. Ibid., 58.3–4.
36. Ibid., 58.5–6.
37. Ibid., 58.7–12.

him and destroy him gradually. Ever vigilant, it took him twelve years, though, to find Nala's Achilles' heel. He found it: one day he noticed that after his minor ablutions, Nala had washed his hands and face but had not washed his feet and had sat down for his evening ritual prayer. And it was from there that he entered Nala.[38] It was indeed a sign of the Dark Age that something so utterly inconsequential, at any rate nothing more than a lapse of hygiene, should have turned into a point from which he could psychically enter Nala who was endowed with the greatest of moral qualities acknowledged even by the gods.

Kali then went to Pushkara, Nala's brother, and prompted him to engage Nala in a game of dice, saying to him: 'I will be with you, and you will easily win that game of gambling, gaining control of King Nala and his kingdom thereby.' Pushkara invited his brother Nala to a game of dice, an invitation promptly accepted; for Nala had a passion for the game of dice. It was indeed that lust of his, the lust for gambling, which was his Achilles' heel. Possessed by Kali-yuga, the Dark Age, Nala began to lose whatever he put on the stake—his gold, his magnificent chariot, his rich royal clothes.

Among his well-wishers, there was none who could stop him from gambling at that time.[39] The word spread, and the people of his capital and his ministers, fearful of an impending disaster, came there, seeking an audience with the king, hoping to dissuade him from gambling any further. Damayanti was informed. Deeply apprehensive and struck with some unknown fear, she came to Nala and informed him about his ministers and the people wanting an audience with him. Nala did not respond but kept gambling. Damayanti stood there, deeply fearful, shaking, and with tears in her eyes repeated her request to him thrice. Possessed by the Dark Age, Nala ignored her and continued gambling with Pushkara.[40] The people and the ministers left, with a clear feeling that 'this king is not going to last long with his kingdom.' The game of dice spread over long time; Nala kept losing.

38. Ibid., 59.2–3.
39. Ibid., 59.7–10.
40. Ibid., 59.15–17.

Damayanti saw that Nala, like someone possessed, was drowned in his gambling, and she was deeply sorrowful. But she herself was very vigilant. Almost certain that some great misfortune was going to fall upon Nala, she called her trusted maid, Brihatsena, who was intelligent, devoted, and pleasant of speech, and said to her: 'Go and bring the king's ministers, as if he was summoning them, after telling them that *this* is what has been lost, but *that* is what still remains.'

The ministers came again, and Damayanti went to inform Nala. But once again he completely ignored her, and, embarrassed and hurt, she returned to her rooms. She heard that every time he made another throw of the dice, it went against him yet again. Thereupon, not losing her judgement although exceedingly fearful and sad at heart, Damayanti decided what *she* should do first. She sent for the king's personal charioteer, Vashneya, and said to him:

> You know that the king has always treated you well: today he appears to be in deep trouble: you must help him.
>
> The more he is losing in this game of dice with Pushkara, the more challenged he feels, and the more spurred to play on, only to lose again.
>
> He is paying no heed to what his well-wishers and near-ones are telling him. He is even ignoring me. I do not believe this to be any fault of his. He is just mesmerised and possessed by gambling, and therefore pays no heed to what I say to him.
>
> Vashneya, I desperately seek your help: my mind is assailed by most unhappy thoughts, in which I see the dark possibility of King Nala losing his kingdom.
>
> Yoke your fastest and the best horses: put these two children in the chariot, take them to Kundinipur (her father's place), and leave them, with the chariot and the horses, with my relatives. You may also stay there, or go elsewhere, as you wish.[41]

Vashneya, reflecting deeply, reported to the senior ministers of the realm what Damayanti had said, and with their consent took the two children, Indrasen and Indrasena, post-haste, to Kundinipur, their grandfather King Bhima's home, and after leaving them, as well as the chariot and the horses, with him, and lamenting deeply for Nala,

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41. Ibid., 60.10–20.

he wandered around, reached Ayodhya, sought service as a charioteer to King Rituparna of Ayodhya, and started living there to earn his livelihood.[42]

After Nala had lost everything he had, Pushkara taunted him to play again, saying: 'you still have Damayanti with you: put her at the stake as well, and I shall win her too.' Hurt to the quick by these brutal words of his brother, Nala took off all the jewels he was wearing and threw them there; kept only one garment on his body; and walked out of the palace.[43]

Nala did *not* put Damayanti at the stake. And Damayanti, clad in a single garment only, followed in the darkest moment of his life, her husband and the man she loved. At the same time, Pushkara, now the king, let it be known far and wide that whoever helped Nala and Damayanti would incur the king's wrath. Fearful for their lives, the people did not honour Nala.[44] Staying for three nights outside the city, but helped by no one, Nala and Damayanti lived only on water. Deserving only of honour, Nala was not honoured in his adversity. Driven by hunger, King Nala travelled to another place. Only Damayanti followed him.

Suffering for many days from the pain of hunger, Nala one day saw, quite near him, some birds with wings of gold. He thought they could eat the flesh of those birds and that he could then sell their golden wings and get some money for their sustenance. Since the birds were sitting on the ground and near him, Nala tried to catch them by throwing on them like a hunter's net the only garment he was wearing. The birds flew away with the garment, saying from where they were beyond his reach: 'You fool! We are no birds, we are the dice pieces used in that game of dice and had ensured your ignoble defeat, but we were not pleased that, after losing everything, you still had a garment on your body when you left the palace. We came here to deprive you even of that.'[45]

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42. Ibid., 60.21–25.
43. Ibid., 61.2–6.
44. Ibid., 61.7–9.
45. Ibid., 61.14–16.

King Nala was naked, his punishment by Kali-yuga complete. In actual fact, his punishment was primarily the punishment of Damayanti who had dared love a mortal in preference to the gods who had desired her. *Her* punishment had to be even greater, not by the gods but by the evil Kali-yuga of Time who also had desired her. It followed soon.

Nala (to Damayanti)

> Those were the pieces of dice whose fury against me robbed me of my glory, now unable to secure even food to sustain us, who ensured that the people of my kingdom Nishadha would not honour me, and now taking the form of birds have deprived me of my only garment, leaving me naked.
>
> In extreme adverse circumstances and in deep anguish I seem to be losing my mind. I am your husband: what I will say to you will be for your good. Listen!'[46]

Nala then said to Damayanti: 'See, these roads lead southwards.' After describing where they all lead one of them, across the river Payoshni, to many hermitages where she could secure plenty of fruits, he said to her: 'And *that* road leads to Vidarbha.'[47]

Vidarbha was the kingdom of Damayanti's father, king Bhima, and her home.

In deep sorrow, and crying pitiably, Damyanti told Nala:

> When I try to understand what is on your mind, I feel only anguish, and as if no life were left in my limbs, I feel paralysed. You are robbed of your kingdom, deprived of your wealth, now deprived of the last garment on your body, and you are in pain. How can I leave you in this deserted forest, alone?
>
> I will console you when, exhausted by hunger, you anguish with the memory of your past glory. *The physicians say that there is no better medicine than one's wife in healing the pain and suffering of adversity. I say this to you truly.*[48]

46. Ibid., 61.17–20.
47. Ibid., 61.21–23.
48. Ibid., 61.25–29.

Nala (to Damayanti)

Damayanti! What you say is absolutely true: for a man in the pain of adversity there is no better friend or medicine than his wife.

I don't want to leave you: why do you entertain in your mind that doubt. *I will sooner give up my life than leave you.*[49]

Damayanti (to Nala)

If you don't want to leave me, then *why* are you showing me the road to Vidarbha?

I know that you will never abandon me. But because this extreme adversity has afflicted your mind, you *may* do that, you could abandon me.

By showing me again and again the road to Vidarbha, you are only increasing my sorrow.

Should this be on your mind that I had better go to my relatives, then may I suggest that let us go to Vidarbha together?

There, the King of Vidarbha, my father, will receive you with the fullest honour; and honoured thus, you can stay happily in my home.[50]

Nala (to Damayanti)

I have no doubt that just as Vidarbha is the kingdom of your father it is my kingdom as well. But in this adversity I will never go there, no. Once, a mighty king, I gave you joy by coming there: I will only sadden you if I come there *now.*[51]

Covering their bodies with the one garment they shared, they reached a traveller's inn in that forest. Unwashed, hungry and tired, there they lay on the floor itself. In this sudden extreme adversity, and exhausted in every limb, Damayanti fell into a deep sleep, but Nala couldn't. Looking at his wife, a princess and a queen, sleeping on the bare floor, grief assailed him from all sides, and many thoughts crowded his already tired mind. He began to reason whether it

49. Ibid., 61.30–31.
50. Ibid., 61.32–36.
51. Ibid., 62.1–2.

would be best if he left Damayanti, in which case she would certainly go back to her father's house, escaping further unknown hardships by remaining with him. But there were other things necessarily to be taken into account. He could not leave her, alone, in that deserted forest, full of dangers at every step. Alone, what would become of her? Yet, this also seemed certain that by remaining with him she would, because of him, only court more suffering; whereas if she returned to her relatives she would at least be safe and comfortable. His reasoning, undoubtedly prompted by his deepest concern for his wife, was all wrong, though. However, his mind possessed by the Dark Age of Time, Kali-yuga, who had installed himself in his inner being, Nala decided to leave his wife while she still slept.[52]

Since he was completely naked, while leaving, he cut with a sharp sword he found nearby, a half of the garment Damayanti was wearing, but so carefully as not to awaken her, and quickly left; only to return quickly, if only to leave her again,[53] and come back again. Torn between his love for his wife and the evil pull of the Dark Age his heart was 'like a swing, coming forward and in the next instant receding quite as much.'[54] Finally, in a complete loss of judgement brought about by the Kali-yuga, Nala left, but not without lamenting bitterly for his wife.

When Damayanti awoke, she saw Nala nowhere there, and her heart was gripped with deep fear when she realised that she had been abandoned. Then began Damayanti's most sorrowful pitiable lament.[55] What also began was her desperate search for Nala.

In that dense forest she looked for him everywhere. Distraught with grief, and utterly exhausted, when she could walk no more she would sit down for a while; again try to get up and walk, only to collapse again. Many different feelings were rushing through her: disbelief that Nala could abandon her and anger at the visible incomprehensible fact that he had. But she was worried about him, too: where would he be? And in what condition, without her by his

52. Ibid., 62.3–15.
53. Ibid., 62.16–29.
54. Ibid., 62.26–27.
55. Ibid., 63.1–7.

side? But, also, she was scared at being left alone in that dense dark forest full of wild animals, and began to cry in her helplessness.[56]

The malicious, unjust, and cruel punishment that Kali-yuga was inflicting upon Damayanti and Nala, for her choosing Nala in preference to the gods, seemed not yet complete. It was strange that the curse of the Dark Age of Time was more potent than the blessings the gods had pronounced upon Damayanti and Nala: none of the four gods appeared to protect them from the Kali-yuga. Walking around as if demented, searching for Nala, Damayanti unseeingly stepped upon a huge python, that began to swallow her from her feet upwards, and she wept even more pitiably.[57] Hearing a woman's cries, a hunter rushed to the spot, and with one stroke of his sword killed the python, cut it to pieces; rescued Damayanti, and arranged for some food for her. As she told him her story, he consoled her in the kindest of words, but his kindness towards her was not without purpose: he looked at the woman he had just saved, and now lusted for her wickedly, his intentions towards her unmistakable.[58]

Even as he tried to move menacingly towards her, and she felt vulnerable, she invoked the power of truth as her only armour, that is, she invoked the power of her goodness in which she had lived. She looked at that hunter with that power now burning in her eyes like fire, and he instantly fell dead like a tree struck with lightening.[59]

Proceeding further, Damayanti passed through another forest, described lyrically in great detail: what is described in even greater detail is what came naturally to her in those circumstances: to ask every tree, every hill, every waterfall, whether it had seen Nala and if he was well. Once she saw a magnificent lion at a distance. *Because she was already drowned in the greatest of her sorrow, her separation from her husband, Damayanti now could fear nothing:*[60] *she was now totally fearless also because she seemed to be assured by some power within her, the power of the truth of her being, the power of*

56. Ibid., 63.13–17.
57. Ibid., 63.20–25.
58. Ibid., 63.26–34.
59. Ibid., 63.35–39.
60. Ibid., 64.11.

the truth of her love. Fearless, she addressed from a distance that lion: 'You are the lord, the king, of this forest. I am Damayanti, a Princess of Vidarbha, and wife of King Nala, king of the Nishadha country. Hungry and tired, I am searching for him everywhere in this dense forest. If you have seen Nala, assure me that he is safe and well; if not, since you look hungry, eat me and liberate me from my misery.'[61] The lord of the forest paid no heed to her, and at his lordly pace went towards the river, and Damayanti was disappointed.[62]

After three days and three nights of wandering around in that forest, she came to another forest, a much gentler one, where she saw many hermitages, in which a great many ascetics and saints lived.[63] She saw in a circle a number of hermitages; the sight comforted her greatly. Damayanti entered one of them and reverentially saluted those who were there. One of them said: 'Devi! You are welcome!' After making her comfortable with all the expressions of greatest respect to a woman, they asked: 'What can we do for you? What brings you here?' Astonished by her extraordinary beauty and grace, they further asked: 'Tell us who you are: are you a goddess of this forest or the deity of the hills here or the deity of this river?'[64]

Damayanti said: 'I am neither a goddess of this forest; nor am I the deity of the hills; nor am I the deity of this river. I am a human being.'[65]

She introduced herself fully: 'I am the daughter of a king, the daughter-in-law of a king, and the wife of a king. I am known as Damayanti.' She spoke of her father, of her father-in-law, and of her husband Nala whose great qualities she described in detail.[66] 'Some wily, dishonest, expert gamblers invited my husband to a game of dice and robbed him of his kingdom and his wealth. Deeply grieved at heart I am searching for him in forests, hills, lakes, rivers. Have

61. Ibid., 64.31–35.
62. Ibid., 64.36.
63. Ibid., 64.61–63.
64. Ibid., 64.68–75.
65. Ibid., 64.74–75.
66. Ibid., 64.78–84.

you seen him anywhere? If I do not find him I will end my life; for without him I see no meaning in life.'[67]

Hearing her story, the story of a woman in visible distress, the ascetics said to her: 'With the power we have gained from our ascetic life, our *tapas*, we can see that you have a happy future, and you will before long meet your husband, King Nala, liberated from all his worries. He has a great and prosperous future, too.'[68]

Then a miracle happened. Assuring Damayanti with those words, the ascetics vanished, and with them their hermitages vanished, too. Astonished beyond belief, Damayanti greatly wondered: 'Where have those saintly ascetics vanished? Where have their hermitages vanished? Even those trees, that river, have vanished! *Was I dreaming*?'[69]

But by now, to Damayanti everything was possible, even the impossible. What she thought was impossible, had also happened: Nala had left her, and she was again wholly drowned in the thought of Nala.

As it always does in narrating stories of the human situation, the *Mahabharata*, at the same time as it describes quickly changing human fortunes and wildly fluctuating human emotions, also describes in lyrical words forests, hills, rivers, lakes, trees laden with fruits, flowers of every hue, birds and animals, and the clouds and the sky. It is in some intimate relation with them that human situations progress and much of the drama of human destiny is played. Their description is a part of the *Mahabharata*'s inquiry into the human condition.

Damayanti next strayed into another forest, which is described as if it were a garden of enchantment.[70] Here she encountered a large group of travelling-traders who were crossing the wide-bank river, and she went up to them.[71] They were astonished beyond belief to see a woman whose beauty and grace seemed not of this earth,

67. Ibid., 64.87–90.
68. Ibid., 64.92–95.
69. Ibid., 64.96–99.
70. Ibid., 64.110–111.
71. Ibid., 64.114.

wrapped in a half garment, looking unwashed, weak, sad, alone in that forest, giving the impression of being totally mad. Seeing her appear amongst them suddenly like an apparition, some were struck with fear and began to run away; some were curious; some others mocked her; but there were also some who felt very kind towards her.[72] They went up to her, and asked her: 'Kalyani! Who are you, whose wife are you, and what are you searching in this forest? The sight of you fills us with grief. Are you a human person? Or, are you the presiding deity of this forest and of the hills? Or, are you some celestial bird, perhaps some evil spirit, or are you some goddess? Whoever you are, we seek your protection, so that this group of traders may pass this place and reach its destination safe and secure.'[73]

Damayanti told them all about herself, assuring them that she was a human being, desperately searching for her husband, King Nala, in one forest after another. She asked them in a pitiful voice if they had in their travel through the forests seen Nala. A man who introduced himself as the head of that group, its manager, spoke to her most respectfully thus: 'No, we have in this vast forest seen no human being. It is inhabited only with the wildest of animals, and we have been seeing only elephants, leopards, lions, bears, bison and deer. You are the only human being we have seen.'[74] On learning from him that the traders were heading towards the capital city of the kingdom of Chedi where they hoped to make good profit by selling their merchandise, Damayanti started to travel with them. At that time, it was *she* who needed protection—from the malice of the Dark Age of Time.

Not long thereafter, the traders camped for a night on the bank of a river, when in the stillness of the night when they were all sleeping, a herd of wild elephants that had smelled some country elephants that belonged to the group attacked them with uncontrollable fury and also killed a great many among those prosperous traders as they

72. Ibid., 64. 116–117.
73. Ibid., 64.118–121.
74. Ibid., 64.127–130.

slept.[75] Only a few escaped that sudden dreadful death suddenly that night. Damayanti awoke too; saw that destruction; and she was frightened beyond words, for never before had she seen anything so horrible. The few who had survived gathered together, attributing that event to many different probable causes: some, to their not propitiating the Spirit of that forest; some, to their not propitiating this god or that; some, to their ignoring bad omens; some others, plainly to their karma. But one of them said, 'That mad-looking woman who came to us, in the disguise of a celestially beautiful woman, was in actual fact a daemon, a dangerous evil spirit. It is she who spread all this evil maya. Undoubtedly an evil sorceress, that it was she who created this disaster requires no proof. She came to us as some evil enchantress, a witch, indeed'[76]

Sanskrit, is the language of the *Mahabharata*, and other Indian vernaculars likewise, is rich in words that are commonly used to describe a woman who has become an object of utmost fear, and therefore an object of intense hatred—*rakshasi*, *pishachi*, *kritya*, and many more, all of them having the general meaning of '*a witch*'. When Damayanti heard those words being applied to her, her soul shrank in shame and disgust.[77] But she also became fearful in the extreme, fearful for her life, when she heard that man declare furthermore: 'We will either stone her to death or burn her on a pile of dried grass.'[78] Fearing that they might combine to kill her, she quietly slipped away, and ran into the forest. There, sitting on a stone, she began to reflect on her very painful situation and what might be the cause of it.[79]

She thought that her miserable situation, her separation from her husband, might perhaps be a punishment for her ignoring, in preference to Nala, the man she loved, some of the gods of the universe.[80] She thought wrongly. For, the four gods had been so

75. Ibid., 65.7–15.
76. Ibid., 65.25–28.
77. Ibid., 65.29.
78. Ibid., 65.28.
79. Ibid., 65.29–34.
80. Ibid., 65.41–42.

impressed by the sincerity of her devotion to Nala that, far from feeling insulted, they had blessed both. Damayanti did not know that it was Kali-yuga, an Age mostly of scandalous conduct, that had felt scandalised that a mortal woman should dare ignore the gods who had desired her and choose a mortal man instead. But Nala did not know that either.

However, now travelling with some itinerant brahmana-s, Damayanti reached, before the dusk had fallen, the capital city of King Subahu, the King of Chedi. Walking on the busy streets, again she attracted much attention, not all of it pleasant, and a group of children, with immense curiosity about her, started walking with her, around her. Damayanti reached the gates of the royal palace, and was noticed from her room by the Queen Mother, who told her maid, 'Go and bring that woman to me. People seem to be harassing her, and she needs protection. Her beauty is so luminous that it will bring light to my home.'[81]

A long conversation took place between Damayanti and the Queen Mother, or the *Raja-mata*. Withholding her own royal connections, and pretending that she belonged to that caste of women known as *sairandhri*, or maids working in royal households, Damayanti narrated to the Queen Mother her whole story as it had unfolded till then, including the manner of Nala, the man she loved and who was her husband, leaving her while she was asleep, and how she had been searching for her beloved husband since, but had neither seen him nor had any word about him.[82] While narrating her story, Damayanti broke into tears of unspeakable sadness. Greatly moved by her sadness, the Queen Mother said to her: 'You will stay with me! I will have your husband found. Or it may even be that he may himself come this way some day. You stay here, and you'll find your husband. I have come to love you very much', the Queen Mother said.[83]

'I will stay here,' Damayanti responded, 'but with certain rules: I will not eat what is left over by somebody; I will not wash anybody's

81. Ibid., 65.45–50.
82. Ibid., 65.55.63.
83. Ibid., 65.65–66.

feet; and I will not enter into a conversation with any male here.' 'Should any man try to force his attention on me, he will be liable to be punished by you; and in case of repeated offence and misbehaviour liable to be punished even with death. In search of my husband, I will meet only with brahmana-s. If all these things can be arranged, I will most certainly stay here. Else, I do not want to stay anywhere.'[84]

Immensely pleased on hearing Damayanti speak thus, for even though she was in great distress she insisted on keeping her dignity, the Queen Mother said to her: 'Dear daughter! I shall ensure all these: it is most admirable and fortunate that *these* should be your resolutions.' Saying this, she introduced Damayanti to her own daughter Sunanda. 'Sunanda! Look upon this *sairandhri* as someone with *devi-swarupa*, the form of a goddess. She is of the same age as you are: consider her your *sakhi*, friend and companion, and may you live with her full of joy.'[85]

Surrounded with her other companions, Sunanda, with the greatest of delight and enthusiasm, brought Damayanti to her own rooms. Respecting her in every way, attentive to her every wish, Sunanda began to take care of her, and Damayanti lived in the palace without any anxieties.[86]

Meanwhile King Bhima of Vidarbha, Damayanti's father, had dispatched several brahmana-s in search of his daughter and her husband Nala, promising most generous and lucrative rewards if they found both of them or even one of them.[87] Most of them could not trace the couple anywhere; but a young brahmana called Sudeva somehow sighted Damayanti in that palace of the King of Chedi.

Damayanti was standing with Sunanda. The more Sudeva looked at her the more he was convinced that she was Damayanti. He had seen her in her childhood and in her growing years many a time, and quickly recalled her luminous beauty which had always seemed to

84. Ibid., 65.67–71.
85. Ibid., 65.72–74.
86. Ibid., 65.75–76.
87. Ibid., 68.3–6.

everybody then, as it did now, not of this earth.[88] Knowing what he had to do, he somehow reached Damayanti in the palace. Sunanda had left her alone for a few moments. Sudeva approached Damayanti, and said: 'I am Sudeva, a dear friend of your brother and sent by your father to find where you might be. Your father and mother and your brother are well, and your children in Kundinipur are well too. Worried about you, your relatives look lifeless; and hundreds of brahmana-s, spread on this earth, are searching for you.'[89] Recognising Sudeva, and seeing him arrive there most unexpectedly, Damayanti was overcome as much with delight as with some deep sorrow and burst into tears.

When Sunanda, a little distance away, saw Damayanti talking to a brahmana and crying bitterly, she went forthwith to her mother and reported this to her. The Queen Mother came there straight, and summoning Sudeva asked him: 'It seems as if you know her. What I ask you, you must answer truly. Whose wife and whose daughter is this beautiful young woman? How has she got separated from her husband and other relatives? How has she come to this very sad pass? I want to know all this in detail about this lady who looks like a goddess in human form.'[90]

Sudeva gave the Queen Mother Damayanti's fullest introduction. What he added was that Damayanti carried on her face a distinctive birth mark—a small mole between her eyebrows that everybody had seen from her childhood and which enhanced her exquisite beauty a thousand times more. 'This small lotus-like mark, a rare sign of greatest good fortune, is at present covered, though, like a moon in eclipse, owing to her recent sorrows and her unwashed appearance, but I recognised it straightaway on seeing her.'[91]

On hearing this, Sunanda washed the dirt obscuring that birth sign on Damayanti's forehead, and it sparkled 'like the moon uncovered from a layer of clouds.'[92] Seeing it unmistakably, both

88. Ibid., 68.10–26.
89. Ibid., 68.27–30.
90. Ibid., 68.36–39.
91. Ibid., 69.5–9.
92. Ibid., 69.10–11.

Sunanda and the Queen Mother gave a shriek of recognition and of delight, and then burst into tears, holding Damayanti in a close embrace, unable to speak for some moments.

Then the Queen Mother said to Damayanti:

> Dear daughter! You are the daughter of my sister! Because of this birth mark of yours I too have recognised you. I and your mother are the daughters of King Sudama, King of Dashartha country. Your mother was married to King Bhima and I was married to King Virabahu. You were born in my father's house in Dashartha, and I was present at your birth. Damayanti! My home should be to you what your father's home is, and all this prosperity and glory is yours as much as it is mine.[93]

Saluting her aunt, and her heart filled with delight, Damayanti spoke thus:

> Even though you did not know who I was, I have lived here very happily, protected by you, my every wish met. I have no doubt that I would be the happiest living here; but, living in exile as it were, I have not seen my parents for long. Permit me, dear mother, to go to Vidarbha. Moreover, I had sent my children to Kundinipura, and they live there. Separated from their father, they have been separated for long from their mother too. How would these unfortunate children be living?
>
> Mother! If you wish to do good to me, then kindly arrange soon for a fast chase that will take me to Vidarbha.[94]

The Queen Mother made the required arrangements for Damayanti's travel: put her in a palanquin; sent a large army to escort; and packed much food, and other necessities, for the journey.[95] After a few days Damayanti reached the capital city of Vidarbha, to the great delight of everybody, and was welcomed by her parents with the greatest affection. As thanksgiving for uniting with her parents and with her children, Damayanti worshipped the gods of the universe, and distributed generous gifts to scholars and ascetics, the brahmana-s. King Bhima rewarded Sudeva most handsomely.

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93. Ibid., 69.12–16.
94. Ibid., 69.18–21.
95. Ibid., 69.22–23.

But *where* was Nala?

After leaving Damayanti in the forest, alone, as she slept, Nala strayed into a dense vast forest where he noticed a forest-fire, and soon heard a human voice calling out to him: 'Good King Nala! Come fast, save me!' And he heard this said in a loud voice two or three times. Saying quite as loudly 'don't panic!', Nala rushed into that burning forest, and saw a huge snake lying coiled, seemingly sleeping.[96]

'I am Karkotaka Naga', the Snake spoke. 'I am in this desperate state owing to the curse pronounced upon me by the sage Narada whom I had misled and cheated. His curse upon me was: "you will remain here immoveable like the trunk of a tree till King Nala comes and takes you somewhere else and liberates you from my curse." I cannot move a step from where I am. Save me from this fire and I shall be your friend, and help you in many ways.' The Karkotaka Naga miraculously reduced itself to the size of a thumb: Nala lifted him easily and took him to that part of the forest which was not burning, saving his life thereby. However, before he could put him down on the earth, Karkotaka stung Nala, injecting into his body his poison. Nala instantly turned black all over, now unrecognisable from his earlier self.[97]

Before Nala could say to him, 'is *this* your reward to me for saving your life?', Karkotaka, who had assumed his earlier human form, quickly said: 'I did this so that people might not recognise you. More importantly, the Dark Age of Time, the Kali-yuga, residing in you, and who has unjustly brought upon you all your misfortunes, will burn in the fire of my poison and, unable to bear it, will be forced to leave you. You did not deserve to be harassed thus, you caused no offence, and yet he tricked you. Hereafter there will be no danger to you from wild animals or from poisonous substances: and you will always be victorious in war.'[98]

96. Ibid., 66.1–3.
97. Ibid., 66.9–12.
98. Ibid., 66.12–19.

Nala took literally, and very wisely, a most earnest suggestion Karkotaka Naga made to him. He suggested to Nala that he should travel to Ayodhya, the capital town of the kingdom of Ayodhya; meet King Rituparna; seek employment as his personal charioteer, under the assumed name of Bahuka; teach him his unparalleled skill in driving horses, *ashva-vidya*; and in return learn from King Rituparna *his* mastery of the game of dice, and also gain his friendship.[99] Karkotaka said to Nala: 'Trust what I say to you. You will regain your wife, your children, and your kingdom. Don't let pain and sorrow assail your mind.'

Furthermore, Karkotaka assured Nala: 'Should you wish to appear in your former form, think of me and wrap this piece of cloth around you. Covered with this cloth, you will instantly return to your former form.' Saying this, Karkotaka Naga gave Nala two pieces of cloth—and then vanished out of sight.[100]

Again, all this is to be understood metaphorically. Karkotaka was not a snake, a cobra that the word '*naga*' would ordinarily denote, but an influential personage of the tribe of an ancient people—Naga. They existed in India when the *Mahabharata* was being composed, as they exist now. The *Mahabharata* mentions them numerous times in one context or another, and always with honour. A Naga has a deep sense of gratitude, requiting in ample measure what he or she receives from another, and then does not linger to extract the price of the good he has done. The good done, he vanishes out of sight. The 'piece of cloth' that Karkotaka gave to Nala was not an item of aboriginal magic but something metaphorical, which its recipient understood. 'The poison' Karkotaka Naga injected into Nala, transforming him into a black-complexioned person, had its purpose—to make him unrecognisable so that he would be free to move about without being instantly recognised as King Nala, among its other benefits being that Pushkara's men would not be able to trace him and harass him further. And 'the piece of cloth' the Naga gave, which would enable Nala to regain his former form, had a deep metaphorical image: a means to recovering his former identity.

99. Ibid., 66.20–22.
100. Ibid., 66.24–26.

On the tenth day after Karkotaka Naga had gone, Nala arrived in the capital city of King Rituparna. Admitted into the king's presence, Nala introduced himself as Bahuka. He also claimed that no one could match his skill in driving horses at the fastest speed. He also claimed that he could do every other kind of domestic work besides. Because he was in acute financial difficulty, he sought service with the king. 'Provide me with the means of my sustenance.'[101]

King Rituparna said: 'Yes, you stay here. The one thought that is always on my mind is that I should be able to reach with the greatest speed where I wish to go. I want you to train my horses in that way. From today I appoint you as the head of the royal stable, your annual salary will be ten thousand coins. You will have Vashneya and Jivala as assistants to serve you. Stay here happily.'[102] This Vashneya was once the personal charioteer of King Nala;[103] but he could not recognise his former master King Nala, now Bahuka.

Nala began to live with honour and dignity in the service of King Rituparna. But not a day passed without his thinking of Damayanti. In his distress he would, every night, repeat only this: 'Hungry and thirsty, tired in her every limb, and yet thinking of that man of poor judgment, where would she be sleeping and where would she be living.'[104]

Hearing Nala's lament every night, Jivala asked him: 'Who is this woman for whom you sorrow every day? I would like to know. Whose wife is she for whom you are perpetually drowned in sorrow?'[105]

Nala answered thus: 'she was the wife of a man of low-intelligence. She who was worthy of the greatest respect was abandoned by him: and that unfortunate man got separated from his wife in circumstances over which he had no control. Separated from her, he has been wandering around, burning day and night in the fire of pain and sorrow for her. Such was she as a woman and wife that she followed

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101. 67.2–4.
102. 67.5–7.
103. See p.69 of this chapter.
104. 67.8–10.
105. 67.11–12.

him to the forest in the darkest period of his life, but he abandoned her, alone in that forest, exposed to every kind of danger, not knowing even the way out of it'[106]

Soon after Damayanti was reunited with her parents and with her two children, and was safe and warmly secure in her parents' home; on her pathetic urging her father King Bhima sent many brahmana-s in different directions to search for Nala. They were promised rich rewards. Before leaving on their mission, they asked Damayanti if there was any message she would like to be conveyed to Nala if he was found. Damayanti was not just a grieving woman; she was a highly intelligent person as well, and thought of a method, however improbable and sentimental it sounded on the surface, by which Nala could, perhaps, eventually be traced.

She requested the brahmana-s to recite in the prominent public places of cities and towns the lament of a woman deeply grieving for her lost husband. The substance of that somewhat long lament[107] was: a question addressed to her invisible husband: why did he leave her, alone in that vast forest, the way he did, cutting a half of the one garment that she was wearing *and* the assurance that still wrapped only in that half-garment, she was waiting for his return. Should anyone respond to that lament, they should return forthwith and report to her what exactly was said in response. 'But nobody should know', Damayanti said to them finally, 'that it is *my* lament and that you are *my* messengers.' The brahmana-s travelled far and wide looking for Nala in villages, towns, cities, even in hermitages, but could not trace him.

After a long time, one of them, called Parnad, returned and reported to Damayanti thus: 'Looking for King Nala everywhere, I happened to go to Ayodhya, and there in the royal assembly of King Rituparna I recited several times your lament, but neither King Rituparna nor anyone of his royal assembly said a word in response. However, after I had taken leave of the King, one of the men around him, Bahuka, the King's personal charioteer, rather an ugly-looking man

106. 67.13.17.
107. See ibid., 69.37–44

with short arms, but highly skilled in driving horses fast, met me privately and responded to your lament, saying:

In the face of even the most trying circumstances of life, women of good breeding protect themselves by the power of their own Self, conquering thereby truth and heavens, too: of this, there is no doubt.

Women truly great do not turn hostile to their husbands who abandoned them.

That man who abandoned his wife was himself in great distress, robbed of every means of comfort and happiness, and had therefore lost his judgement. If it was in such circumstances that he abandoned his wife, she must not be angry with him.

In his trying to find some means of livelihood, some birds flew away even with his last garment, and he was cruelly assailed by a host of worries. She must not be angry with that man.

In the stressful circumstances that he found himself, whether, or not, her husband treated her with honour, she should forgive him, keeping in view the fact that, deprived of his kingdom and wealth, nearly insane with hunger, he was drowned in the deep waters of one calamity after another.[108]

Hearing this account from Parnad, and convinced that only Nala could have responded in those words, Damayanti expressed profusely her gratitude to Parnad: 'you have done me the greatest good and now I have every hope of meeting my husband.' She rewarded him with plenty of money, promising even more when she was reunited with King Nala. Parnad, a quintessential brahmana, was most pleased with the money he received and the promise of more; gave his fullest blessings to Damayanti; and returned home, to his family.

Damayanti came to her mother and said most pitiably: '*Please*, let father not know this that I propose to seek, in your presence, Brahmana Sudeva's help. Just as he succeeded in reuniting me with my family here; so will he go to Ayodhya, with the mission of bringing Nala.'[109]

Summoning Sudeva in the presence of her mother, Damayanti said to him:

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108. Ibid., 70.8–12.
109. Ibid., 70.14–17.

Please go to Ayodhya with the speed of a flying bird and say this to King Rituparna: 'Not knowing whether Nala is alive or dead, Damayanti has decided to marry again, and hence her svayam-vara tomorrow. When the sun rises tomorrow, she would have chosen her husband. Should it be possible for you to come, then come fast.'[110]

On Sudeva conveying to King Rituparna this message very quickly, the King said to his charioteer Bahuka, 'I must reach the Vidarbha capital by tomorrow. With your skill in driving horses like wind, you can take me there.[111]

There *was* going to be no *svayam-vara* in the Vidarbha capital. That was Damayanti's brilliant ploy to bring Nala there. From the information Parnad brahmana brought, and her woman's instincts, Damayanti was certain that it was Nala who had sent her that return-message. But it was not yet conclusive proof that it was, indeed, Nala. Rather, there was a gnawing doubt that, perhaps, it was not Nala; for Parnad had described the man, who had responded on hearing Damayanti's lament as 'ugly-looking with short arms', which was not the description of Nala. And Damayanti had no means of knowing that Karkotaka Naga had meanwhile transformed Nala so as to make him unrecognisable from his famous previous form; and that, with a view to enable him to move around freely. Parnad had brought the information, besides, that the man who had responded, Bahuka by name, was King Rituparna's personal charioteer, incomparably skilled in driving horses at the speed of the wind. Damayanti knew, as many others did, that King Nala, and Nala alone, had that skill and the required knowledge of horses, *ashva-vidya*. Therefore, if Nala had to be brought to the Vidarbha capital as a conclusive proof of his identity, King Rituparna had to be brought there, and the only way to rouse Rituparna's interest in making that very long journey from Ayodhya at such a short notice was to have it announced to him, *even if falsely*, that Damayanti, not knowing for sure whether Nala was alive or dead, had decided

110. Ibid., 70.22–26.
111. Ibid., 71.1–2.

to marry again and would hold her *svayam-vara* the next day. The ploy worked perfectly.

At the same time as he asked Bahuka to drive him to the Vidarbha capital, King Rituparna also told him the reason why he wanted to reach there in what unmistakably seemed some desperate hurry—Damayanti's *svayam-vara* the next day. On hearing the reason why *his* services were naturally required, Nala hidden now as Bahuka felt deeply sad but he did *not* burst into some long soliloquy pronouncing gravely upon the fickleness of woman. On the contrary, though incredulous that Damayanti would decide to marry again, he thought that:

> Deceived by a low and cruel man like me, she might. Her pain and sorrow in being abandoned by me have perhaps prompted her to take this step, and my offence *is* terrible. Deeply grieved by her separation from me, and not knowing whether she will see me ever again, she is taking this step. But my heart says that none of this is true. It is also likely that she has announced her plan to re-marry as a way of finding me. Anyway, tomorrow I will find out the truth of it all. For my own sake too, I must therefore fulfill this desire of Rituparna.[112]

Nala did not let his feelings of sadness interfere with what was his first obligation then: to take his master to the Vidarbha capital by the next day.

Nala as Bahuka harnessed the finest and the strongest horses in the royal stable,[113] yoked them to the chariot, and set off with King Rituparna, with Vashneya as a spare charioteer, on their long journey, with the speed of the wind. This Vashneya, as mentioned earlier, was once the personal charioteer of King Nala;[114] but he could not recognise his former master King Nala, now Bahuka. On the way, both the King and the spare charioteer absolutely marvelled at Bahuka's complete control of the horses which, driven by him, were not running but simply flying.[115]

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112. Ibid., 71.3–8.
113. Ibid., 71.11–17.
114. See pp. 74–75 of this chapter.
115. *Vana-parva*, 71.22–28.

In narrating a story of a human situation, the *Mahabharata* never neglects important practical details. In this case, it was important to know what the distance was between Ayodhya and Kundinipura, the capital city of Vidarbha, which had to be covered in a day. Vidarbha was a region which corresponded more or less to what it is now, in central India, forming the eastern boundary of what is now the state of Maharashtra. The distance between Ayodhya and Vidarbha is mentioned as a hundred *yojana*-s.[116] One *yojana* is calculated to correspond roughly to four or five English miles; according to another calculation, some nine English miles.[117] That is to say, the distance from Ayodhya to Vidarbha sought to be covered in a day was not less than nine hundred miles which, if converted into kilometres, would have been not less than, say, some fourteen hundred kilometres. It is more or less the same distance even today.

The improbability, even the impossibility, of that distance being covered in one day, given even the strongest and the fastest of horses yoked to structurally the most stable of chariots and driven by the most highly skilled charioteer, particularly when there were on the way hills and valleys and rivers and forests and large towns, and the same high speed could not have been uniformly maintained, need not detain us here.

What was of utmost importance, nearly a miracle, was what happened on the way. When Bahuka, King Nala in disguise, stopped the chariot for a while, to receive from King Rituparna his secret knowledge of the art of gambling, in exchange for Nala teaching him his secret knowledge of horses,[118] the Dark Age of Time, Kali-yuga, unable to bear any more the fire of the poison Karkotaka Naga had injected into Nala's body, came out of Nala, where he had resided for long causing his loss of judgement and which had led to Nala and Damayanti's miseries and suffering.[119]

On seeing Kali-yuga emerge from his body, Nala was about to curse him angrily; whereupon, shaking with fear, he said: 'Great

116. Ibid., 73.26; 74.9; 76.30.
117. See *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary* by Monier Monier-Williams, p. 858.
118. Ibid., 72.27–29.
119. Ibid., 72.30–31.

King! Control your anger. I have been burning already in the fire of Damayanti's curse upon me and also in the fire of Karkotaka's venom. I have already suffered much. I now seek refuge in you. If you control your anger; by giving protection to a man in great fear and seeking refuge in you, no mortal will ever fear me hereafter.'[120] King Nala said to the Kali-yuga; 'Go'.

As Kali-yuga left him, Nala felt unburdened in his mind and spirit, but his former self was not yet restored: 'that was the only lack that still remained.'[121] Driving now with even greater speed towards the capital city of Vidarbha, they reached their destination by sunset. King Bhima was informed of the arrival of King Rituparna.[122] At the sudden unannounced visit of the King of Ayodhya the King of Vidarbha was as surprised as the King of Ayodhya was perplexed by King Bhima's question to him: 'And what may be the reason of this sudden visit of yours?' Being very perceptive, and seeing not even the remotest sign of a *svayam-vara* the next day, and thinking that there was definitely something seriously amiss, Rituparna quickly steadied himself and said to King Bhima: 'Oh! I came just to greet you!'[123]

King Bhima of course smiled warmly but thought to himself: 'He has travelled this very long distance of more than a hundred *yojana* but mentions a very ordinary reason behind it. Surely he has not come all the way from Ayodhya to Kundinipura simply to greet me! Anyway, I'll find out tomorrow what the actual reason behind his visit is.'[124] For the present he said to Rituparna: 'You must, indeed, be very tired, take a good rest now.' King Rituparna, very pleased at his warm welcome, was escorted to his rooms in the palace, where he retired with his royal attendants and his other charioteer Vashneya. Nala unharnessed the horses, patted and gently caressed them for their amazing performance, and sat in the rear part of the chariot.[125]

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120. Ibid., 72.33–35.
121. Ibid., 72.43.
122. Ibid., 73.1.
123. Ibid., 73.22–25.
124. Ibid., 73.26–28.
125. Ibid., 73.30–31.

Meanwhile, on hearing the sound of King Rituparna's chariot entering Kundinipura, there was much turbulence of intense feelings and expectations in Damayanti's heart.[126] Her belief, bordering on inner certainty, that it was King Nala, her husband and the man she loved from all her being, whose chariot alone when driven by him could produce that kind of sound, was hampered, however, with several likely doubts.

A truly extraordinary characteristic of Damayanti, from which men and women of all climes and of all times can learn, was that neither in the intensity of her love and its ecstasy nor in the depths of her grief and sorrow, did she lose her capacity to think clearly and not reach conclusions in a hurry. Most of us see what we *want* to see, hear what we most *want* to hear, believe what we *want* to believe, and reach conclusions that are most agreeable to us. Not Damayanti.

Although convinced deep within her that it was, indeed, Nala who had brought Rituparna from Ayodhya to Vidarbha in a day, for he alone could do that, her whole being was thrilled beyond words at the prospect of reuniting soon with her husband, Damayanti's mind was cautioning her *not* to conclude finally what she had; for inner certainty, however strong, was not always, nor necessarily, a conclusive proof of any thing. She thought: 'It is a definite possibility that Vashneya has meanwhile learnt the secret knowledge of horses; it is equally likely that King Rituparna himself has that knowledge and drove the chariot. That might be the reason why the chariot was producing the sound it normally would when driven by Nala.'[127] The more importantly, on watching Rituparna's chariot approaching the Palace and seeing in it Rituparna, Vashneya and Bahuka, she saw no sign of Nala among the three.'[128] Who was this Bahuka?

Damayanti decided, therefore, to take into confidence her trusted maid Keshini, and said to her: 'Keshini! Go and find out who that ugly-looking man with short arms sitting in the rear of the chariot is? I have this strange doubt that he maybe King Nala in disguise!

126. Ibid., 73.8–15.
127. Ibid., 73.34–35.
128. Ibid., 73.34.

From this feeling of happiness and peace I feel in my mind, my suspicion is becoming a certainty.'[129] 'Just repeat to him what in the form of Damayanti's lament Parnad brahmana had said to him, and listen attentively to his reply.'[130]

Keshini engaged Bahuka in a conversation, and Damayanti waited for her return.

Keshini (to Bahuka)

I have come to inquire about your well-being. The Princess of Vidarbha would like to know when you started from Ayodhya, and what is the purpose of your visit here?[131]

Bahuka (to Keshini)

The King of Ayodhya heard from a brahmana that there would be a second *svyam-vara* for Damayanti tomorrow. On learning this, the King mounted the chariot to which were yoked horses that could travel a hundred *yojana* in one harness. I was his charioteer during this travel.[132]

Keshini (to Bahuka)

Who is this third person among you? Where does he come from? And who are *you*? Whose son are you? And how did this work fall upon *your* shoulders?[133]

Bahuka (to Keshini)

Vashneya is the name of that third person. He is actually the personal charioteer to King Nala; but after King Nala was banished to forests he went into the service of King Rituparna. I am a charioteer, too, and the King appointed me in his personal service on a salary.[134]

129. Ibid., 74.1,3.
130. Ibid., 74.4.
131. Ibid., 74.6–7.
132. Ibid., 74.8–9.
133. Ibid., 74.10.
134. Ibid., 74.11–12.

Keshini (to Bahuka)

Bahuka! Does Vashneya know where King Nala has gone? Did he ever tell you anything concerning him?

Bahuka (to Keshini)

After bringing here the two children of King Nala, Vashneya went away to Ayodhya. He knows nothing about King Nala.

Neither does any other man know anything about Nala: his former visage is concealed, and he roams around this world incognito.

God alone has knowledge of Nala, or his own inner Self knows about him. No one else knows anything about him; for King Nala now does not reveal himself to anyone.[135]

At this point, Keshini said to Bahuka, as Damayanti had asked her to do, that once a brahmana visiting Ayodhya for the first time recited again and again the following sentences that a woman had taught him; and repeated to Bahuka, word for word, what Parnad had recited in Ayodhya. When Keshini told Bahuka that the Princess of Vidarbha would be pleased to hear from him what he had then said to Parnad, Bahuka repeated exactly, word for word, what he had said to Parnad brahmana.[136]

Keshini narrated her conversation with Bahuka to Damayanti, hearing which Damayanti was more convinced that Bahuka was none other than King Nala in disguise, and she again sent Keshini to him. 'Keshini! Go again and examine Bahuka closely. This time say nothing to him, but just observe him in the smallest thing he may do. If you notice in Bahuka something very special, almost divine, note that carefully and come back and tell me.'[137]

Keshini again visited Bahuka; observed him closely; and reported to Damayanti what special things she had noticed in him.

Keshini (to Damayanti)

Damayanti! Every act of his is pure. Such a person I have neither seen nor have I heard of.

135. Ibid., 74.14–16.
136. Ibid., 74.17–21, 25–30.
137. Ibid., 75.1–5.

While entering even a small door, he does not bend his head; rather, the door quickly gains in height in a way that his head does not touch the door when he enters.

And a narrow space becomes wider to accommodate him.[138]

Also, the fire does not seem to burn him; and the water flows as he commands. I noticed in him yet another astonishing thing: he slowly rubs flowers in his hands, but they are not disfigured thereby; rather, they become even more fragrant and still more fully blossomed.[139]

Now convinced that Bahuka was none else but King Nala in disguise, Damayanti now sent her two children to him. Keshini took them to Bahuka. On seeing his son Indrasen and daughter Indrasena, he recognised them instantly, drew them into his arms with a father's surging love, and began to weep.[140] Then, disengaging himself, he turned to Keshini and said: 'These two children are like my own; on seeing them, I could not control my surging love. But, dear lady, you are visiting me again and again and it is night, and this will not go unnoticed. We are guests here. I now suggest you return to the palace.[141]

This time Damayanti sent Keshini to her mother, the Queen, with this message: 'Mother! I have had Bahuka investigated in many ways, and now there is no doubt whatsoever that he is, indeed, King Nala in disguise. All that remains is for me to see him as a last act of confirmation. Please, either send for him inside the palace or permit me to visit him.' The Queen, after consulting King Bhima, allowed Damayanti to send for Bahuka and meet him inside the palace.

The two of them, with undiminished and abiding love for each other but cruelly separated for long, at last met, and those moments were highly charged. Much was said, and much was heard, with tears of grief and joy.'[142]

In the main, Damayanti asked Bahuka:

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138. Ibid., 75.8–10.
139. Ibid., 75.25–17.
140. Ibid., 75.23–26.
141. Ibid., 75.27–28.
142. Ibid., 76.9–21.

Bahuka! Have you ever seen any man given to *dharma* who had left his wife, as she slept, tired in every limb, alone in a forest? Who else but the Great Nala could do that?

I wonder what offence I ever caused him that he should have abandoned me like that?

At my *svayam-vara* I chose *him* in preference to the gods because I loved him; and in the presence of those very gods he promised me his abiding love and devotion. Where did that promise of his vanish?[143]

Nala spoke:

That I lost my kingdom, and also abandoned you, were the doing of Kali-yuga, the Dark Age of Time. I did not leave you of my own volition, no.

By your cursing *whoever* had caused you and me that great suffering, the Dark Age of Time was cursed, and he began to reside in my body, making me lose my judgement. But now he has left me, and I have came here with the main purpose of regaining you.

But you are going to marry again. It was announced that 'Damayanti is free, and will take as she likes another husband.' That is what has brought King Rituparna here.

But, Damayanti, how can you leave the man who has for you undiminished abiding love and take another husband?[144]

Even as she was reassured, Damayanti shuddered on hearing those words, and said:

Do not fling at me that accusation. I am *not* a wayward woman, the three gods of the universe—*Vayu*, *Surya* and *Chandra*, the Air, the Sun and the Moon, the universal witnesses in all beings—are the witnesses of my truth, I do not propose to take another husband, and there *is* no second *svayam-vara* for Damayanti. The whole thing was set up as a ploy to bring you here.[145]

And she unfolded to Nala the whole story of her attempts so far to find him.[146] The three gods as witnesses to Damayanti's truth

143. Ibid., 76.10–14.
144. Ibid., 76.17–24.
145. Ibid., 76.25–35.
146. Ibid., 76.27–30.

spoke to Nala, and he was reassured.[147] He now wrapped himself with that magic cloth Karkotaka Naga had given him, and was instantly restored to his former visage and self.

Learning of the blessed reunion of her daughter Damayanti with her husband King Nala, after three years of cruel separation,[148] the Queen conveyed the happy news to King Bhima, and there was great rejoicing in the palace. The next day the whole city of Kundinipura celebrated with colours and lamps, and with flowers and flags, the return of King Nala; prayers were recited in all the temples; and people danced in the streets. After all, Damayanti was a daughter of that town, and her sorrow and suffering had become known.

On coming to know the true identity of his charioteer Bahuka as King Nala and his reunion with Damayanti, King Rituparna sincerely rejoiced too, with just a touch of embarrassment, though. He asked Nala, now from one king to another, to forgive him if, not knowing who he really was, he had ever addressed one rude word to him, and Nala assured him with much gratitude that, on the contrary, he had lived under his protection happily.[149] King Rituparna once again taught him what he had himself mastered, the secret knowledge of the art of gambling, the game of dice, and took from him as exchange his mastery of the knowledge of horses. Then with Vashneya as his charioteer for the return journey, he returned to Ayodhya.

The final act remained to be played. After staying at Kundinipura for a month, Nala returned to his own capital with royal ceremony and invited his brother Pushkara for another round of the game of dice, an invitation Pushkara readily accepted, but not without throwing at Nala some nasty comments. The game began, Pushkara staking everything and losing. Eventually he lost the game to King Nala and, having nothing, was now completely at his mercy. King Nala most generously restored to Pushkara what he had lost, saying to him: '*you* did not defeat me in the game we had played earlier: I

147. Ibid., 76.36–39.
148. Ibid., 76.37.
149. Ibid., 77.8–16.

was defeated then by Kali-yuga. For the misfortunes that came upon me and my family I will not hold you accountable when it was some other who was accountable. Go and live where you wish, with my assurance of safety.'[150] Pushkara fell at his brother's feet in complete submission.

The sage Brihadshva concluded his narration of the story of Damayanti and Nala with one of its main lessons stated as:

> *When* daiva, *providence, appears to be against, and* purushartha, *self-effort bears no fruit, men living in truth do not grieve, nor lose heart.*[151]

The story of Damayanti and Nala is also the *Mahabharata*'s universal metaphor for love conquering even the most adverse circumstances of life created by the turn of Time.

The *Mahabharata* sets out the relative and progressive decline in the physical and moral qualities of human species through the passage of *kala*, Time, dividing Time in four successive *yuga*-s, meaning 'epoch' or 'age'[152]: *Krita-yuga*, the Golden Age; *Treta-yuga*; then *Dvapara-yuga;* followed last by *Kali-yuga*, the Dark Age. The physical and moral decline, both personal and collective, as characteristics of each *yuga* are described in considerable detail.[153]

The stories of Savitri and Satyavan and of Damayanti and Nala are the *Mahabharata*'s universal metaphor for love as the most redeeming presence in the darkest period of Kali-yuga.

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150. Ibid., 77.4–28.
151. Ibid., 79.14
152. See *Vana-parva*, Chapters 149, 188 and 190.
153. Ibid., for the Krita, 149.11–22; for the Treta, 149.23–26; for the Dvapara, 149.34–38; and lastly for the Kali, 149.34–38 and 190.11–91.

5

Language, Meaning and Truth

Suvarchala

The story of Suvarchala unfolded in answer to a question Yudhishthira put to the dying Bhishma during their long dialogue that covered practically every question relating to the human condition. Yudhishthira asked him if he knew any example of a married couple who, living the ordinary life of householders, had gone beyond the ordinary conflicts of life, and risen to a highly evolved state of being. Bhishma then narrated the example of Suvarchala and Shvetaketu.[1] In actual fact, it is through her that the *Mahabharata* explores the relation between language and meaning.

Suvarchala was the daughter of the sage Devala, famous for his learning. Endowed with every happy attribute, 'she was neither too tall nor too short, neither fat nor too slim.'[2] When she came of age, her father asked her what kind of man she would want for a husband.

Suvarchala replied: 'Give me in marriage to a man who is blind and also not blind. Please keep in mind this wish of mine.'[3]

'What crazy talk is this? This wish of yours is never going to be fulfilled; for such a man, who is both blind and not-blind, is non-existent. I feel sad that you should say such a mad thing', the father replied.[4]

'I am not mad. What I said was after much thought', Suvarchala said to her father.

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1. *Shanti-parva*, Ch. 220.
2. Ibid., 220., Vol. 5; p. 4988. (In the Gorakhpur ed. of the *Mahabharata*, none of the verses in this long chapter is numbered. I have provided the number of the page on which the referred verse is to be found.)
3. Ibid., 220.
4. Ibid., 220; Vol. 5; p. 4989.

She was talking metaphorically; he, being a scholar, literal-minded, took it literally, and completely missed what she really meant. Devala still dismissed what Suvarchala had said as a young woman's, particularly a daughter's, occasional crazy talk. He let it be known among eligible young brahmana-s far and wide that his daughter was now ready for marriage and would make her choice from among them. On the appointed day, several young brahmana-s gathered at Devala's house, and he received them with great respect. Suvarchala appeared, greeted the gathering most respectfully and said: 'Should there be among you one who is blind and also not blind, I will take him as my husband.'[5] The gathering broke up. The suitors thought her announcement was some kind of joke; they felt insulted and left, angry, but without saying a word to Devala, who felt highly embarrassed by what he thought was his daughter's mad behaviour. But he did not say anything to her.

A few days thereafter, a young man, Shvetaketu by name, who had heard of the ideal man Suvarchala was seeking, one who was blind and also not blind, appeared at her doorstep. He was the son of the famous sage and teacher Uddalaka. Receiving him with all the ceremonies attached to the expression of great respect, Devala introduced Shvetaketu to Suvarchala in words of highest praise, finally suggesting that she take him as her husband; for, the father thought, there could be no better match for her.[6] She looked at him somewhat skeptically,[7] for she did not want to be disappointed again, if he too were to interpret her literally and dismiss her talk as simply mad. Interpreting that look of hers rightly, Shvetaketu said to Suvarchala: 'That I am blind, of that there is no doubt; that I am not blind, of that there is no doubt either. I am, thus, both blind and not-blind. I am the man you are looking for. I have come for you.'[8]

5. Ibid., 220; Vol. 5, p. 4989.
6. Ibid., 220; Vol. 5, p. 4990.
7. The text has the word *kupita*, which generally means 'angrily', but in the context here it clearly means 'skeptically'; for there was no reason whatsoever for her to look at the young visitor 'angrily', particularly when her father had introduced him in words of highest praise.
8. Ibid., 220; Vol. 5; p. 4990.

He explained himself further.

Since I am endowed with *that* which at all times enables one to see, hear, touch, smell, speak, taste, think, and reflect on the true substance of things, and constitutes in a true sense the 'eyes', I am not blind.

But, excepting functionally, since I do not relate with the world that is sensed, seen, heard, touched, smelt, tasted, reflected upon, I am in that sense blind.

Accept me.[9]

Since no living being cannot *not-be-related* to the world that is sensed and yet live, although Shvetaketu was saying that clearly metaphorically, he added the following by way of further explanation:

It is only with a view to preserving *loka-samgraha*, the functional order of human life, I do the customary daily things of life; but I do not get involved in them, for I know what the Self, the *atman*, is.

Knowing what the Self is, and having seen that whatever happens has a cause-effect link, I look upon the pleasant and the unpleasant as they come to me in the same light, and live my life free of jealousy and resentment.

I have the means of taking care of you. Accept me.[10]

Suvarchala was delighted that she had at last met someone who did not take her literally when she said that she wanted to marry a man who was both blind and not blind and had understood what she meant.

Suvarchala (to Shvetaketu)

I have in my heart accepted you already. The rest is to be done with sacred rites by my father. Now, ask him for my hand formally.

With all the sacred ceremonies, in the presence of many other sages, Devala happily gave his daughter in marriage to Shvetaketu.

Having got Suvarchala as his wife, Shvetaketu glowed with happiness that was, indeed, divine. He said to her:

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9. Ibid., 220; Vol. 5; p. 4990.
10. Ibid., 220; Vol. 5; p. 4990.

Be my companion in the togetherness of *dharma*, in ordering our lives together, *saha-dharma-charini.*

That is how I perceive our marriage: you perceive it likewise.

You should act, but in the knowledge that '*the acts are not mine; I am not their doer*'. A most blessed person you are, remove from your mind all those notions of 'mine*ness*' and ego. I shall do likewise. People follow superior examples: therefore, with a view to preserving the functional order of human life and securing our own good thereby, both of us must always act, but in that light.[11]

Suvarchala and Shvetaketu lived the life of a husband and wife; raised a family; but also floated together in the highest regions of mind and spirit—and had profound and exciting conversations, when they sometimes played with each other.

One day she asked him: '*Dvija-shreshtha*! Tell me, who *are* you?' Being playfully literal, somewhat teasingly, he replied: 'you have addressed me as *Dvija-shreshtha*: so, you already know who I am!' He knew that the word '*dvija-shreshtha*' was only a customary form of respectfully addressing any superior brahmana and was not a personal identity. Equally playfully, Suvarchala said: 'no, I want to know about *that* who resides in the depths of your heart.' Still playful, Shvetaketu replied:

But *that* who resides in the depths of my heart, my *atman*, the Self, is not going to speak! It is true that the notion of 'I am', *aham*, the ego, is attached to the *atman.* In that sense I am *aham*, you are *aham*, everything is an expression of *aham;* but it has no substantive realty. Then why do you ask about it?[12]

Suvarchala (smilingly)

Never mind! It seems to me, though, that in your getting entangled in the daily acts of living a family life, your knowledge is in danger of vanishing. Say something about that; for I am now going to follow you.[13]

She had not invited an arid debate on what was a familiar philosophy of human personality, with different views on it. Her

11. Ibid., 220; Vol. 5; p. 4991.
12. Ibid., 220; Vol. 5; p. 4991–92.
13. Ibid., 220; Vol. 5; p. 4992.

inquiry was different. Without saying so, and although she was very happy in her marriage, Suvarchala had the same fear about herself: that in getting entangled in the daily acts of life-in-family, with all complexities, her mind was in danger of being clouded and her spirit imprisoned. That fear had to be cleared first. Being wholly attentive to his wife, Shvetaketu wanted first to assure her that there was no innate conflict between living as husband and wife, raising a family, and still floating in the highest realms of the mind and the spirit, together or alone.

Shvetaketu

> The masses follow the example of superior people. If we abandon the ordinary functional order of life, there would be the anarchy of confusion in social functions. The social order thus disturbed, 'the law of fishes', *matsya-nyaya* (the stronger fish swallowing the weaker fish), would follow. And that is not what God has ordained for the world.
>
> This world being God's creation, it has as many attributes as His; and they, as many forms of illusion, *maya;* and those, as many forms of energy and power as *maya* has.
>
> Narayana (God) Himself has declared: 'those who, understanding the nature of things, still act and endeavour obtain the highest state of being: those drowned in ignorance, spreading thereby the confusion of social functions, and transgression of social discipline and limits, *loka-maryada*, create for themselves and for others only hell.'
>
> With a view to preserving social discipline, and thus the good of the world, you should perceive our married life in that light, as I do.[14]

Suvarchala knew all that. Actually none of it removed, in principle, the apprehension she had—about her learned husband expressly, but also about her, unspoken. The inquiry uppermost in her mind was still different; and she wanted to engage Shvetaketu in what is manifestly a pressing but complex question—*the relation between language and meaning*. She moved her conversation to that area by asking:

14. Ibid., 220; Vol. 5; p. 4992.

What is *word*? And what is *meaning*? Please explain to me their form and their attributes, each separately.[15]

Shvetaketu

When the letters of the alphabet are arranged in a particular order, what emerges is *word*: and what that word denotes is its *meaning*.

This implied that *meaning* is derived from, and is dependent upon, *word*. Suvarchala questioned that formulation; for it is manifestly true that meaning can, and often is, conveyed without word(s). Deepest emotions are often expressed without words, and profoundest truths through silence. She asked:

If there is *meaning* only when there is *word*, then what kind of relation exists between the two, if it does?[16]

Suvarchala was clearly holding what is evidently true that not only is *meaning* not always derived from *word*, but also that the same word can have different meanings when used in different contexts, or used metaphorically. What then is the exact relation between *word* and *meaning*? She asks Shvetaketu to enlighten her on that.

Shvetaketu

In a way there is no definite and permanent relation between *word* and *meaning*. If there is, it is like that of water on a lotus leaf.[17]

That is to say, *meaning* slips and slides on *word*. This was not particularly satisfactory; for he had earlier maintained that *meaning* is wholly dependent on *word*, which is a fixed and invariable relation. Suvarchala did not want to be argumentative; however, since it was clearly important to understanding this subject, she now asked:

Meaning inheres in *word*. It follows that *word* will not hold without *meaning*. But you are saying that there is no definite and permanent relation between *word* and *meaning*, which goes against the commonly held belief in this regard.[18]

15. Ibid., 220; Vol. 5; p. 4992.
16. Ibid., 220; Vol. 5; p. 4992.
17. Ibid., 220; Vol. 5; p. 4992.
18. Ibid., 220; Vol. 5; p. 4993.

Shvetaketu

I have not said anything that goes against commonly held belief. Just as the physical world cannot exist except in *akasha*, space, and there is no fixed and permanent relation between the two, the same is the case with *word* and *meaning*.[19]

Simultaneously, since the question of *meaning-less* is inseparable from the question of *meaning*, like 'sense' and 'non-sense' or plain nonsense, Suvarchala now asked the opposite but logically related question:

If *meaning* exists upon *word*, then *word* must likewise have *meaning*. Is there, or can there be, any word which is *meaning-less*?

Shvetaketu

The relation between *word* and *meaning* is that of speech, and this relation is undoubtedly permanent. If there is a *word*, there has to be *meaning* to it, even if, as in some cases, the letters are arranged in reverse order and pronounced that way.

But although Suvarchala had asked a seemingly limited question—was there, or indeed could there be, any word which was meaningless?—her concern was with the wider philosophic implications of *meaning*, and thus also of the *meaningless*: and then not only with their philosophical implications but with their emotional implications as well. Thus, a situation, or a relationship, can be, and often is, *meaningless*. As to the philosophical meaning of *meaningless*, she asked:

The word '*aham*' is always used to refer to the Self, the *atman*. At the same time, the Upanishad-s (*shruti*) had concluded and pronounced that 'language cannot describe the *atman*, for it has no reach there'. In that case, to use the word '*aham*' (or use any other word) for 'Self' would be false and meaningless.[20]

19. Ibid., 220; Vol. 5; p. 4993.
20. Ibid., 220; Vol. 5; p. 4993.

Shvetaketu

'Blessed one', *shubhavrate*! Actually the word '*aham*', 'I', is not used to refer to the *atman*, the Self. For what is beyond 'qualities' and 'attributes', as the *atman* is, cannot properly be described by language that commonly denotes only substance with 'qualities' and 'attributes'.

And yet, just as in a pot of clay, a very specific thing, there is inherent (in the generic sense) the sense of clay, or 'clay-sense', likewise there is in every created thing a sense of the self, the 'self-sense'.

'I', 'You', 'This', are actually words, names, given by us to created things but have no substantive reality. There is thus no inner contradiction in the *shruti* (Upanishad-s) concluding that language cannot reach what is beyond description.

While it is true that we mistakenly assign meaning to words that have no substantive ground; it is, however, also true that just as the physical world has no innate relation to space, *akasha*, yet appears to be held in space, words, language, *appear* to be suffused with what they are referring to when in actual fact there is no permanent or even essential relation between them.[21]

Expanding a little more on that, and going beyond the first inquiry Suvarchala had brought up—the relation between *word* and *meaning*, whether it is permanent and invariable or variable—Shvetaketu was now talking mainly of how language is incapable of comprehending and describing the ultimate reality, and yet, because the ultimate reality, the *Brahma* or the *paramatman*, or 'the Greater Self', inheres in language as well, language must in some essential way appear related to it even though it is not. He said:

The *Brahma*, the ultimate reality, cannot be described by language, nor can the physical eyes 'see' it, yet it can be seen (with the eyes of *jnana*, which is much more than conceptual 'knowledge'). So I believe.[22]

'It then comes to this', Suvarchala said, 'that just as space, *akasha*, or the sky, that has no form, no boundaries, can still be 'seen', so can the *atman*, like space formless and limitless, be 'seen'.[23]

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21. Ibid., 220; Vol. 5; p. 4993.
22. Ibid. 220; Vol. 5; p. 4993.
23. Ibid., 220; Vol. 5; p. 4993.

Shvetaketu

Through one's skin one repeatedly touches the air located in space, *akasha*; through one's nose one smells the smell located in space; through one's eyes sees the light located in space.

Besides, one repeatedly sees darkness, rays of light, formation of clouds, rain and the stars, all located in space; yet, one does not 'see' space itself, does not 'see' *akasha*. One can see the sky, but not space.[24] Neither can one see the *paramatman*, 'the Greater Self', the space in and beyond all space, *mahakasha*, which is all pervasive.

The names denoting the attributes of the *paramatman* are in actual fact only notional, only functional. Neither through the eyes, nor through the mind, nor through any other senses or faculty can the *paramatman*, 'the Greater Self', be grasped and comprehended. The speech, *vani*, language, cannot reach there. The *paramatman* is to be comprehended only by subtle intelligence.

This *paramatman* is neither 'male', nor 'female', nor 'neuter' (thus, words like 'he', or 'she', or 'it', cannot describe it), only pure consciousness.[25]

But these are *words*, too: 'pure consciousness'!

Shvetaketu did not see, and if he did, did not *say* it, that there was a crippling contradiction in his main formulation thus far, which actually was not *his* formulation but of the Upanishad-s, that language, words, can say nothing meaningful about the Ultimate Reality and yet this was *said* in words, in language. Suvarchala quickly saw the innate *meaningless-ness* of *saying what cannot be said without contradicting what is said at the very moment of saying it.*

Suvarchala

What can *word* prove? I believe that (beyond a point) *word* serves no real purpose.[26]

After saying this, Suvarchala raised another question which followed from what she had said and was clearly implied in it, and was most challenging in its suggestion. She said:

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24. The word *akasha* denotes both the sky and space.
25. Ibid., 220; Vol. 5; p. 4994.
26. Ibid., 220; Vol. 5; p. 4994.

> Just as there are in this world, words and propositions that are *meaningless*, could some of the words and propositions in the Veda-s be not *meaningless* likewise?

Because the Veda-s were a 'sacred cow', although to the *Mahabharata* nothing, indeed nothing, was a 'sacred cow', and everything in life was open to inquiry, to being examined honestly, Shevtaketu was anxious, or so it seemed, to keep the Veda-s from Suvarchala's pressing but complex inquiry as regards language, meaning and truth.

Shvetaketu

> No functional word is ever *meaningless*, how can the words in the Veda-s then ever be meaningless! In a functional sense the words that are unrelated to each other and have no coherence are alone considered meaningless.
>
> Blessed one, *shubhe*! It is true that like all functional words although the words in the Veda-s are also considered useful, and therefore meaningful, they are however incapable of describing what is beyond the grasp of language. At best, words can only *point to*, indicate, what may be the nature of the *paramatman*.
>
> The inquiry in the nature of Self, *adhi-atman*, or *adhyatman* (misleadingly translated as 'the spiritual' and thereby missing the point completely), lights and radiates knowledge, *jnana*, and takes one into the highest regions of being.[27]

In the concluding parts of their conversation especially, Shvetaketu addresses his wife Suvarchala with a word of highest respect and not just endearment: *shubhe*, 'blessed one'! Apart from developing the area now known as the philosophy of language and meaning, they lived the ordinary life of a *grihastha*, householder, and radiating in the light of philosophic inquiry, which was at the same time spiritual inquiry, they reached the highest state of being, the highest state of *saha*, *togetherness* in marriage.

Many centuries later, a Viennese brother of Suvarchala, who taught philosophy at Cambridge University, Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951), would conclude his profoundest inquiry into language and

27. Ibid., 220; Vol. 5; p. 4995.

meaning by saying: *Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.*[28] Besides suggesting that if what is said is taken too literally, one misses the meaning completely, for some of the profoundest things of life are often expressed only metaphorically, or can be expressed only metaphorically; Suvarchala had also suggested that *whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.*

28. *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus* (first published in Germany in 1921, and then in London in 1922). The added emphasis in the quotation here is mine.

Sulabha

Like most other stories in the *Mahabharata*, the story of Sulabha[1] has many levels, saying many things at the same time, some expressly, others suggestive. Her story unfolded in answer mainly to a question, or rather two questions that are distinct, concerning the ultimate liberation, *moksha*, which Yudhishthira had put to the dying Bhishma:

> Is there anyone who has, *without ceasing to live the life of an ordinary householder,* reached the state of ultimate liberation, *moksha*?
>
> And what, indeed, *is* the substance of the state of that ultimate liberation?

As regards the second question, only partly stated above, Yudhishthira seemed to have even at the time of asking it, a clear idea of the main substance of *moksha*. Seemingly asking a question, he was already stating a very substantive piece of knowledge about what was asked.

> *Tell me about the substance of that state of total liberation,* moksha, *in which a person goes beyond the opposite notions both of the manifest and the un-manifest concerning the self.*[2]

His first question clearly suggested that he was not seeking knowledge about *moksha* as such but whether there was any person who living the ordinary life of a householder had yet achieved complete liberation, which presupposed that it was possible.

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1. Narrated in the *Shanti-parva*, Ch. 320.
2. *Shanti-parva*, 320.2.

This story is simultaneously, even primarily, the story of a woman's, Sulabha's, teachings as regards language, meaning and truth. But it is not just a woman's brilliant discourse on linguistics either: it *is* that, but it is not that only. Sulabha's story can be most effectively told only in the contrasting background of great pretensions. And of pretensions, the human world is full; which the *Mahabharata* often recounts, almost always with a sense of laughter, as a part of the human condition.

In answer to Yudhishthira's inquiry, Bhishma narrated the story of Janaka, the king of Mithila and a householder, a man of the world, and of Sulabha, an anchorite, a *yogini*, who had renounced the world, and their encounter. Janaka was making great claims in most extravagant language, which had become very widely known, about his having achieved in this life itself, even as a householder, ultimate liberation, *moksha*,[3] and citing his personal example was pronouncing on what *moksha* truly was. Sulabha had heard from the other anchorites she had met in her many travels much about King Janaka's claims to *moksha*. Wanting to know if there was any truth in his claims, Sulabha resolved to visit him in the capital of his kingdom. Using her yogic powers, she meanwhile transformed herself into a young and radiantly beautiful woman;[4] arrived in Mithila; and entered Janaka's Court, seemingly begging for the customary alms. The king was surrounded by his ministers and several highly learned men

Greatly struck by her beauty and her youth, Janaka wondered even more: '*Who could she be? Who does she belong to? Where has she come from?*'[5] Satisfied with the fullest welcome accorded customarily to a sannyasin, Sulabha prepared herself to putting some questions to Janaka, with a view to finding out whether his claims to having attained *moksha* had any merit in them. Perhaps wanting to have more a private conversation than a public debate with him, and again using her yogic powers Sulabha concentrated her eyes upon his, held the light in his eyes still, and then held his mind in a

3. We meet this King Janaka in the *Brihad-aranyaka* Upanishad also.
4. Ibid., 320.10–11.
5. Ibid., 320.13.

kind of mesmeric hold, *yoga-bandha*, and entered, *in a psychic sense*, King Janaka's subtle inner being.[6] He quickly sensed what she was about, and smiled. She installed in the space of his inner being, and both, in the inwardness of their inner beings, now divested of the familiar outward signs of their respective callings, royalty and renunciation, a long and intense conversation took place between them.[7]

Very long and spread over diverse grounds, that conversation had a definite structure, however, which should be kept in the main, unaltered here. First, Janaka asks Sulabha a few questions about her:[8] introduces himself to her as to who he truly is, or rather thinks who he truly is—a man liberated from the human condition, *jivana-mukta*—and in the process, also pronounces what *moksha*, ultimate liberation from the human condition, truly is:[9] becomes increasingly aggressive, indeed abusive, towards her:[10] accuses her of various transgressions:[11] in defending herself in the gentlest of tones[12] Sulabha actually mocks at him, but more in disappointment than in derision: and simultaneously instructs him in the proper use of words in the first place.[13]

Janaka spoke for long and Sulabha did not interrupt him, not once, not even when he was being abusive to her. It was only after he had finished his self-praise combined with his discourse on *moksha* and an attack on her that Sulabha answered him, and then she spoke nearly quite as long, particularly when she instructed the king on language, meaning and truth.

Janaka first *asks* Sulabha a few questions about her:

> Where did you have your initiation into the life of *sannyasa*? Who do you belong to? Where have you come from? Where will you be going?[14]

6. Ibid., 320.17.
7. Ibid., spread over 170 *shloka*-s: 320.20–192.
8. Ibid., 320.20–21.
9. Ibid., 320.23–52.
10. Ibid., 320.54–56; 64–75.
11. Ibid., 320.55–70.
12. Ibid., 320.77, 87–90, 175–188.
13. Ibid., 320.78–94.
14. Ibid., 320.20.

Ordinary questions, asked by ordinary men; but asked by a man who was claiming he had achieved ultimate liberation from the human condition these questions said something very different. And that is what Sulabha would later point out, more in puzzlement than in derision.

Janaka next introduces himself to Sulabha as to who he truly is, or rather thinks who he truly is—a man liberated from the human condition, *jivana-mukta.*

> For a while I have put aside my signs of royalty, such as the royal umbrella; for I want you to know what I really am, and also because I want to honour you, for you seem to be one deserving of honour.[15]

In saying this, Janaka wanted to assure Sulabha that the dialogue between them was to be on the basis of complete equality: she was not to be awed by his royal insignia any more than he was to be awed by her, *tri-danda*, three-pronged stick of renunciation, of a sannyasi. That settled, in theory at least, he proceeded:

> But I should first also tell you that I am a disciple of that great sage Panchashikha, of whom there is no equal in his knowledge of the philosophies of Samkhya and Yoga and *Moksha.*[16] It is from that guru of mine who happened to pass this way and spent with me the four months of the rainy season that I received the enlightenment of true knowledge, and all my doubts have been resolved.[17]
>
> He showed me the path to ultimate freedom from the human condition, *moksha*, but did not permit me to renounce my kingly duties and life.[18]
>
> Free from all confusions, my mind now endowed with the enlightenment knowledge brings, I have gone beyond all entanglements. Though remaining a householder, I am still free from the conflicting dualities and the opposites of life.[19]

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15. Ibid., 320.22.
16. Ibid., 320.23–24–25, 27.
17. Ibid., 320.25–27.
18. Ibid., 320.27.
19. Ibid., 320.31.

> Should this one coat my right arm with sandal paste and that one simultaneously hack with a knife my left arm, both will be the same for me.[20]
>
> In my sight a lump of earth, a piece of iron, and a piece of gold, all are alike, of the same value. I am king but without any attachment and grasping, *parigraha*. Therefore my position is very different (far more distinguished, that is) than that of a renouncer with the three-pronged stick in his (or her) hand.[21]
>
> With the sword of detachment sharpened further on the flint of the philosophy of *moksha*, I have cut the binding cords of the glory and power of being king, and also those of worldly affection and love. I am a *jivana-mukta*, liberated from all that is the human condition while still being in it. Being at the places that are of bondage, of material prosperity, sexual desire, and a ruler's grasping, *artha*, *kama* and *rajya-parigraha*, I am still free of all bonds. Know me as such: free, liberated, *jivana-mukta*.[22]

The sage Panchashikha had taught King Janaka the fundamentals of Samkhya and Yoga philosophies as philosophies also of life. But it was Janaka's wife, Kausalya, who had taught him the most: first as regards the false logic of what is only outward *sannyasa*, renouncing the world and taking to the ochre robe outwardly, and then the true meaning of *moksha* as the highest liberation possible even in the state of being a householder. However, in his conversations with Sulabha, while Janaka was proudly acknowledging Panchashikha as his great guru,[23] he did not once acknowledge what he owed to his own wife Kausalya, who had saved him from taking a false step and its visible and invisible consequences.[24] Could it be that, like most men, Janaka thought it to be more impressive publicly to acknowledge one's intellectual debt to a great guru than to a woman, one's wife?[25] Furthermore, almost all the ideas concerning true

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20. Ibid., 320.36.
21. Ibid., 320.37.
22. bid., 320.51–52.
23. See pp. 111 above.
24. See *Shanti-parva*, Ch. 18.
25. That this is not purely speculative, can be seen in the *Yoga-Vasisishtha*, one of the most important works of Indian philosophy, where King Shikkidhvaja says about his wife Choodala: 'She is my wife, she cannot also be my guru', when Choodala was a teacher not only to her husband but to all mankind.

renunciation and *moksha* he had derived from *her*, he was now putting forth to Sulabha as his own, and exactly in the same words.[26]

But let us first hear the teachings of King Janaka's wife as regards his mistaken reasoning, that *sannyasa* is a state necessarily of freedom and the path to *moksha*, and life-in-family necessarily a state of bondage of every variety, behind his decision to renounce the world and take to the ochre robe. She asked him to consider what kind of freedom it would be when he would have to depend totally on others even for a handful of rice for his daily sustenance?[27] When that necessity and its dependence remains, where is the freedom? She pointed out what was always true, as it is true now, that:

> In this world, the renouncers are sustained by the households. Renouncing family, the renouncers depend for their sustenance upon families nevertheless. It is from there that they arise, and it is from them that they receive recognition and respect.[28]

Next she played upon two similar-sounding words with different pronunciations: *kashāya* and *kāshāya*, the first meaning 'passions' and the second 'ochre colour', and said:

> If passions, *kashāya*, are not removed from one's heart, then wearing the ochre robe, *kāshāya*, should be regarded as nothing more than a means to selfish ends. In my opinion, it is another profession adopted by those shaven-heads waving the flag of *dharma* but insincerely.[29]
>
> To wear the ochre robe; to shave one's head; to carry a trident and a begging bowl—these are mere outward signs of renunciation: in themselves they do not lead to *moksha*.[30]
>
> No one is a monk merely because he has renounced and he begs. He alone is a genuine monk who has naturally risen above one's petty self-interests and is not attached to pleasures.[31]

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26. The reader may compare what Janaka's wife was teaching him in chapter 18 of the *Shanti-parva* with his repeating the same ideas, word for word, to Sulabha in ch. 320 of the same parva.
27. Ibid., 18.20.
28. Ibid., 18.28–29.
29. Ibid., 18.34.
30. Ibid.
31. Ibid., 18.30–2, 34.

'A wife advancing that reasoning may appear to be a self-serving argument; for she would be affected the most by her husband's decision to take to the ochre robe and to the life-alone. At another place, therefore, the *Mahabharata* states the same reasoning, this time in the voice of the sage Markandeya. On the subject of what true renunciation is, or rather what it is *not*, Markandeya says what Kausalya had:

> To carry a trident; to vow silence; to carry the weight of long hair; or to have a shaven head; to wrap one's body with the hide of a tree or an animal; to observe vows, ritual bathing, and the ritual stoking of the ritual fire; to live in a forest; and to starve one's body—all these have no meaning if one's feelings are not pure and clean.[32]

Simultaneously with his self-praise he was pronouncing also on what, if rightly understood, *moksha* truly is. Undoubtedly important, for in his voice the *Mahabharata* is teaching what is radically different from all that had hitherto been said on *moksha*, we may omit that long discourse. What is more pertinent here is the fact that after his highly self-congratulatory self-introduction, King Janaka the self-declared *jivana-mukta* became in the very next breath inexplicably aggressive, indeed abusive, to Sulabha, accusing her of several transgressions. As if preparing the ground for his subsequent attack on her, he first put forth as self-evident his theory: that '*Tenderness, beauty, elegance, and youth: all these are contrary to yoga.*"[33] He was implying that since she was visibly all these—beautiful, elegant and young—she was not a genuine *yogini*. He was still cautious, though, in his applying to Sulabha his theory of beauty and youth being contrary to *yoga*. He cautiously expressed only his 'doubt' as to how the two, contrary to each other, which he had presumed to be self-evident, could then exist in the same person? Very soon he would abandon not only all intellectual caution but also show himself as wanting even in ordinary courteous speech to a woman.

32. *Vana-parva*, 200.96–7; also 104–7.
33. Ibid., 320.54.

Janaka (to Sulabha)

With a view to testing whether I am liberated or not, you have forcibly held me.[34]

In behaving in this manner you are not protecting your *sannyasa.* Endowed with yoga, if one is still driven by one desire or the other, then it is meaningless and hypocritical for one to carry the three-pronged stick of renunciation.[35]

For what purpose have you come to my kingdom and to my city, and on whose urging have you entered my heart?[36]

You have committed thereby many transgressions, which I will recount, and you listen.[37]

Janaka the *jivana-mukta* and the philosopher of *moksha* would hereafter speak more in the tone of a public prosecutor bringing charges against the offending woman; and this he would do not in the privacy of his inner being where, *in a psychic sense*, Sulabha had lodged herself, but apparently in the open royal assembly.

Janaka (to Sulabha)

You are a brahmani and I am a kshattriya. By establishing this physical contact within me, you have transgressed the discipline and the rule of the *varna* (caste), that offence called 'the illegitimate mixing of the *varna*-s', *varna-sankara.*[38]

Furthermore, you are in that separate 'stage of life' called 'going beyond the duties and cares of family life', *sannyasa-ashrama*, and I am a householder, in the *grihastha-ashrama.* By establishing this physical contact within me, you have transgressed the discipline and the rule of 'the stages of life', that offence called 'the illegitimate mixing of the stages of life', *ashrama-sankara,* which is very painful (because very confusing).[39]

I don't even know whether you belong to the same *gotra*[40] as mine, or to a different *gotra.* Neither do you know that about me. This

34. Ibid., 320.55.
35. Ibid., 320.56.
36. Ibid., 320.58.
37. Ibid., 320.57.
38. Ibid., 320.59.
39. Ibid., 320.60.
40. *Gotra* is a kind of lineage, intellectual lineage, derived from one sage or another, each family, and thus each individual, having a specific *gotra.* Those having the same lineage will then be *sagotra.*

is your third transgression, the offence called 'the illegitimate mixing of the *gotra*-s', *gotra-sankara*.[41]

Maybe your husband is alive, or is travelling abroad, and you being a woman belonging to another, you are beyond access, not to be approached. By establishing this physical contact within me, you have transgressed, fourthly, the discipline and the rule of *dharma*, that offence called 'the illegitimate mixing of appropriate conduct', *dharma-sankara*.[42]

King Janaka continued his indictment of Sulabha.

Maybe out of ignorance, maybe out of wrong ideas, or maybe deliberately, you are doing what is wrong. Or if you are free, and have listened to the scriptures, then you have by your conduct rendered all that meaningless. Indeed, you have exposed your hidden intentions.

You are a wicked woman, *dushta*, assaulting my tender feelings.[43]

You want to win. You want to conquer not only me but also all those of my royal assembly. That is why, so as to defeat me and yourself appear to be the winner, you keep flinging your glances at them.[44]

King Janaka next brought against Sulabha what he thought was the most serious accusation of all: that she had lodged herself within him, a kind of sexual act, touching him all over.

Intoxicated with your skills in *yoga*, and self-hypnotized, you are combining sexual impulse, *kama*, with *yoga*, as if poison and nectar could be made one.[45]

When a man and a woman desire each other, the pleasure they derive from their union is like the nectar; but when the woman does not get the man she desires, the pain of it is like poison.[46]

Don't touch me. My character is without blemish; and you, being a renouncer, sannyasini, should follow the discipline of renunciation, *sannyasa*. You cannot conceal from me that you wanted to test whether I am a man liberated from the human condition.[47]

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41. Ibid., 320.61.
42. Ibid., 320.62.
43. Ibid., 320.65.
44. Ibid., 320.66–67.
45. Ibid., 320. 68.
46. Ibid., 320.69.
47. Ibid., 320.70.

If you have come here for some purpose of your own, or have been sent by another king (on a spying mission), then it is thoroughly wrong for you to wear a false guise (of a *yogini*).[48]

Let no man go in a false guise near a king, or near the one of higher caste, or near a good woman; for they can destroy the man who approaches them in a false guise.[49]

You should, therefore, honestly disclose your caste, your education, your calling, the kind of person that you are, and the purpose of your coming here.[50]

Sulabha was not in the least disturbed by the hurting, irrelevant and inappropriate words Janaka hurled at her, or by his insulting conduct towards her.[51]

After the king had finished his long speech, Sulabha, self-possessed throughout, spoke in the gentlest of tones, spoke at length,[52] and covered diverse grounds which may be rearranged to bring what she said in a sharper focus.

Sulabha opened her address to King Janaka with what was wholly impersonal, the structure of meaningful logical language.[53] In itself independent, that was more as a brief preamble to the kind of language she said *she* would be speaking in response to Janaka's indictment of her—suggesting to him, by her example, the kind of language one might justly expect from the man claiming to have achieved that beyond which nothing remains to be achieved. In that she was also teaching us, who may not presume to be liberated, *jivana-mukta*, what kind of language we must speak even ordinarily to be meaningful and truthful.

Sulabha (to King Janaka)

What I will say will be productive, meaningful, fair and just. It will not have more words than necessary, or words that lack coherence of sequence. Neither will it have words that are harsh and hurtful,

48. Ibid., 320.71.
49. Ibid., 320.72.
50. Ibid., 320.75.
51. Ibid., 320.76.
52. Read 320. 77–192.
53. Ibid., 320.78–85.

nor words that have uncertain meanings, nor will it have other words required as props. What I will say will not be irrelevant, irrational, lacking in logic, or untruthful.[54]

I shall not speak out of anger, or from fear, or from some greed. Neither will I say anything out of pride. But nor will I say anything from false humility and false politeness.[55]

Sulabha then offered Janaka, and us, the main elements of meaningful conversation and its language, the choreography of dialogue.

On wanting to speak, when the speaker, the listener, and the speech, come together in unison, then what the speaker says comes clearly into light.[56]

If the speaker disregards the listener, and simply promotes his (or her) self-interest, then what is being said would not reach the listener.[57]

However, if the speaker disregards his (or her) self-interest and speaks solely in the interest of the *other*, then it will give rise to the suspicion of insincerity, which is a defect, too, in language.[58]

The speaker who speaks in the interest both of himself (or herself) and the *other,* is alone a true speaker.[59]

'Now, please give your undivided attention to what *I* shall say',

Sulabha continued her address to King Janaka. 'You have been asking me: *Who are you? Who do you belong to? Where have you come from?* Hear my answer, and give to it your whole attention.'[60] She gave him first a long analysis of the thirty elements that compose the human body,[61] which we may omit here. What she was leading to is, however, more pertinent.

The form a child has at the time of his or her birth changes progressively: it is not to be seen in his or her transition from

54. Ibid., 320.87–89.
55. Ibid., 320.90.
56. Ibid., 320.91.
57. Ibid., 320.92.
58. Ibid., 320. 93.
59. Ibid., 320. 94.
60. Ibid., 320.96.
61. Ibid., 320.97–113.

childhood to youth, and then from youth to old age. On reaching every subsequent stage of physical development, the earlier form is seen no longer.[62]

Likewise, the different characteristics each individual has, which distinguish him or her from others, also keep changing; but those changes, as in the flame of a lamp, are so subtle that they are mostly imperceptible.[63]

Just as a fast running horse is one moment here and in the next moment not seen, this world, too, is moving very swiftly from one state into another. Therefore it will be impossible to say: '*From where does one come, or from where one does not? To whom does one belong, or to whom one does not?*'[64]

If you have a sense of unity with the *other*, seeing your own self in the *other*, then why do you keep asking me: '*Who are you? Who do you belong to?*'[65]

If you have liberated yourself from the conflicting dualities of gaining *this* and avoiding *that*, then what is the point in your asking me: '*Who are you? Who do you belong to? Where have you come from?*'[66]

These questions asked by a man who claimed he had achieved ultimate liberation from the human condition showed something else. And that is what Sulabha was pointing out, more in genuine puzzlement than in derision: She was being neither difficult nor a little too clever in turning ordinary questions into their remote metaphysical meaning. However, in answering Janaka's indictment of her, she answered these questions, too, in their ordinary meaning.

King Janaka had accused her of the offence of occupying him forcibly, of some kind of psychic rape, and thereby committing the offences also of 'the illegitimate mixing of *varna*, *varna-sankara*; 'the illegitimate mixing of the stages of life', *ashrama-sankara*; 'the illegitimate mixing of *gotra*, *gotra-sankara*; and of the offence called 'the illegitimate mixing of appropriate conduct, *dharma-sankara*'.[67]

62. Ibid., 320.119–121.
63. Ibid., 320.122–123.
64. Ibid., 320.124–125.
65. Ibid., 320.128.
66. Ibid., 320.129.
67. See page 138 above.

These charges of illegitimate mixing, even if they were true, which they were not, could arise only from the distinctions made in this functional, conventional, social world and should not have troubled a man claiming to have achieved a state of ultimate liberation, *moksha*. That was so clear even on Janaka's own showing in his discourse on what *moksha* truly is that Sulabha did not need to engage King Janaka on that, but she did. She quickly pointed out serious errors even in the recital of facts in his indictment of her. But firstly this:

Sulabha (to King Janaka)

If you are truly liberated, then what offence have I committed by entering your subtle being through the power of enlightened mind, *sattva*?

It is an established principle that a sannyasi (of either gender) should take residence in a place of solitude. By my doing so in the empty space of your inner being, what pollution have I caused you?

I am not touching you physically in any way, not with my hands, nor with my arms, nor with my thighs, nor with my feet, nor with any other part of my physical body.[68]

King of Mithila! Just as the drop of water on a lotus leaf does not touch that leaf, in the same way without touching you I will remain for a while in your inner being.[69]

If you nonetheless feel my touch, even though I am not touching you, then I can say only this, that you have rendered the teachings of the sage Panchashikha futile.[70]

In sensing the touch of another woman (who is not your wife) you have slipped from the discipline of a householder, and have not obtained *moksha* either. You are dangling between *talking* about *moksha* and living the life-in-family.[71]

His complaint that in her occupying his inner being she was mixing sexual impulse, *kama*, with yoga, an act unworthy of her, was answered by her saying:

68. *Shanti-parva*, 320.169–171.
69. Ibid., 320.175.
70. Ibid., 320.176.
71. Ibid., 320.177.

I have no attraction even to my own body, no attachment to it, how can I then wish to grasp, *parigraha*, another's body? I am a sannyasini, one who has renounced the world, and you ought not to be saying such things to me.[72]

As regards the accusation that in establishing that intimate contact with him, a kshattriya, she, a brahmani, was being guilty of 'the mixing of *varna*', Sulabha quickly corrected him on a point purely of fact.

I am not a brahmani; neither a vaishya, nor a shudra. By birth I am like you, a kshattriya. I was born in a royal family. You must have heard of King Pradhana; I was born in that great family. My name is Sulabha.[73]

The question of fact apart, there was also the question of clear logical implication, and thus an evident fallacy already in Janaka's indictment of her. Sulabha said to him:

To the one who in the state of ultimate liberation has gone beyond all distinctions, and perceives all beings as manifestations of the same Self, the *atman*, there is actually nothing separate from the Self, no *other*, and there can be in that perspective then no 'mixing' of any kind, legitimate or illegitimate.

The 'illegitimate mixing of *varna*' would not arise if one liberated person is united (in whatever sense) with another liberated person.[74]

Furthermore:

I know that each *varna* is considered separate, and so is each stage of life, *ashrama*, considered separate. In that case, too, what are essentially separate can have no mixing, only its appearance.

There is a vessel in the hand, and milk in the vessel, and a fly in the milk, and all three, even though different, because of their position appear connected with each other. Yet, the vessel is not the milk, and the fly has not become the milk.[75]

So, where essential separateness both of *varna* and *ashrama* is strictly advocated, how can there be then any mixing?[76]

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72. Ibid., 320.164.
73. Ibid., 320.183–184.
74. *Shanti-parva*, 320.178–179.
75. Ibid., 320.180–181.
76. Ibid., 320.182.

In either perspective, all that talk about 'illegitimate mixing' was illegitimate talk.

To Sulabha it seemed, above all, most strange that the man professing complete neutrality of feeling whether a person in an attitude of reverence coated his right arm with sandal paste or someone else in an expression of extreme hatred at the same time hacked with a knife his left arm,[77] and was advancing this as a sure sign of his having obtained *moksha*, should be so deeply troubled about the illegitimate mixing of *varna*, a concern more of a caste-governed and casteist society.

Sulabha tells King Janaka a little more about herself:

> Because I did not find a man worthy of me I did not marry, and took the path of renunciation. Living the disciplined life of a renouncer, a *muni*, I live alone and travel around alone.
>
> I have not assumed any false guise. I do not rob others of what is theirs. I remain steadfast in my own *dharma* and do not spread 'the illegitimate mixing of the stages of life, *dharma-sankara*.'[78]
>
> I am resolute in what I resolve to myself that I shall do. I do not speak without thinking carefully. And it was only after careful thought that I came to visit you.[79]
>
> I had heard that your mind was rooted in *moksha*, and I came here to learn its meaning.[80]

Expressing her personal disappointment that in his attitude towards her and in what he had said pertaining to her, she saw no sign of *moksha*, what Sulabha further said to King Janaka was, however, not from any personal hurt but still wholly from an impersonal ground. Even in that, she had shown herself to be vastly superior to the man claiming to have achieved that beyond which nothing remains to be achieved. She was questioning how a king, *given the logic of his situation*, could ever be liberated from the human condition or could even be ordinarily a free man, illusions or pretensions of freedom apart.[81]

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77. See page 134 above.
78. Ibid., 320.186–187.
79. Ibid., 320.188.
80. Ibid, 320.189.
81. Ibid., 320.130–163.

Where is the sign of liberation in the king who is anxious to judge and act right in regard to 'enemy' and 'friend' and 'neutral' on the occasions of conquest, or negotiating a treaty, or punitive aggression?[82]

Where is the sign of ultimate liberation in the king who has not the attitude of sameness towards (the opposites of) the pleasant and the unpleasant alike, towards the weak and the powerful?[83]

Even the emperor ruling the world lives only in one town of his empire; and in that one town, he lives only in one palace. In that palace he has only one bed to sleep on; and, then too, the half of that bed is claimed by his wife. Thus, he has very little he can call wholly his own[84] (though the fool still thinks he owns all that he surveys).

In matters of personal use, food, shelter, and other things of personal enjoyment, as in putting down the wicked and supporting the virtuous, he is actually in the hands of others: there is hardly anything which he can do freely. Is he free to negotiate a treaty or launch punitive aggression? In his Council of Ministers, while consulting them, is he really free?[85]

Often the king is forced by his ministers, advising him, to act against his own inclinations; yet, he gives the impression of authority and freedom when he orders others.[86]

Likewise, in the company of women, in sports, and in the enjoyments, the king has virtually little freedom.[87]

Sulabha pointed out, furthermore, how because of his very situation a king is full of fears and suspicions, a sign more of bondage than of freedom:

On noticing the learned, the brave, and the rich, all assembled at one place, a king is struck with suspicions as to their motive. On their part, thinking that they are suspected unjustly, they begin to have for that king ill-feelings. What fears does that further cause in the mind of the king, you can easily see.[88]

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82. Ibid., 320.130.
83. Ibid., 320.132.
84. Ibid., 320.136–138.
85. Ibid., 320.139–141.
86. Ibid., 320.142.
87. Ibid., 320.141.
88. Ibid., 320.147, 148.

> Even where there is no cause of fear, a king is full of fear; suspicious of even those who day and night are in attendance upon his person, serving him[89]
>
> Always suspicious and assailed still more by conflicting choices and dilemmas, surrounded by many contenders besides, counting sleepless nights: thus does a king rule his kingdom.[90]
>
> Afflicted with mental pain arising from his ambitions and his antagonisms, and from his fears, he is afflicted too with physical illnesses of one kind or another.[91]
>
> I can enumerate here a hundred and thousand things that can cause to a king only suffering.[92]
>
> Who will aspire to kingdom in which there is little joy and suffering, has in it no abiding substance, manifestly transitory like bubbles on the water, and from which no peace of mind can ever be gained?[93]

Sulabha had not listed the ills of being king and of kingdom with a view to advancing some absolute political theory against the institution of kingdom (read 'the state'). Therefore, lest King Janaka interpreted in that light what she had said, she quickly added the evident opposite truth, of which she was perfectly aware:

> If there are no 'people', there can be no 'king': if there is no king, there will be anarchy: then *dharma*, the ordering of life, cannot be: and where there is no *dharma*, there cannot be the highest achievement of life.[94]

Indeed, as if in passing, Sulabha even suggested not only the best and natural composition of the state[95] and, too, the principle of just taxation, one-tenth of the income earned or even less,[96] but also the foundation of the kingdom, the state, run according to *dharma*, that is, according to truth and justice.[97]

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89. Ibid., 320.147.
90. Ibid., 320.153.
91. Ibid., 320.152.
92. Ibid., 320.163.
93. Ibid., 320.154.
94. Ibid., 320.161.
95. Ibid., 320.158–159.
96. Ibid., 320.160.
97. Ibid., 320.162.

Sulabha was only questioning the pretensions of Janaka, a king, of being a totally liberated man; for pretensions, or wrong perceptions of one's self, do one no good:

> If, despite all that (the natural ills of being king and of kingdom), flourishing your royal umbrella and royal silver mace, you still think that you are a liberated man, a *jivana-mukta*, then it may be your delusion.
>
> Pursuit of *dharma*, ordering of life, and of *artha*, material prosperity, and of *kama*, sexual fulfillment or fulfillment of desires generally, are described as *tri-varga*, the 'three ends of life', which express themselves in seven forms. Where is the sign of liberation in the one perpetually involved in those three?[98]
>
> King! I don't think you are liberated; you have only the wrong impression that you are which should be removed from your mind by those who wish you well.[99]
>
> I don't think you have benefited much from the teachings of Panchashikha, that great *acharya*, your teacher. You are as involved in your attachments (and prejudices) as other ordinary men are.[100]

Sulabha concluded by saying to King Janaka:

> I am not saying what I have said from any partiality to my point of view, but sincerely for your good. Just as a sannyasi dwells for a night in an empty house in a town, I will spend this night in the emptiness of your inner being, and shall happily leave tomorrow morning. You have given me much respect and hospitality.[101]

Hearing Sulabha say this, King Janaka said nothing more.[102]

98. Ibid., 320.131.
99. Ibid., 320.133.
100. Ibid., 320.167–168.
101. Ibid., 320.190–192.
102. Ibid., 320.193.

6

Turning One's Face upon the Selfish World of Men

Madhavi

In Madhavi, the beautiful daughter of King Yayati, so beautiful that the gods desired her, we see the portrait of a woman thrown into situations in which there was neither nobility nor meaning. In her portrait, we see also the men, the best of them, concerned only with their own images of themselves. Her dismal tragedy shows how what in itself is a virtue, when separated from the abiding concern for the *other* as the foundation of any relationship, can devastate a whole life. Such virtue then turns into the violence of untruth.[1] Above all, Madhavi symbolises transcending experience as true virginity; that is, true virginity is the virginity of the mind and spirit.

Galava was a disciple of Vishwamitra. After one thousand years of study under his guru when it was time for him to leave, he asked Vishwamitra what he might give him as *guru-dakshina*, a disciple's grateful offering to a teacher. The teacher's answer was: 'leave, leave.' Galava insisted. And Vishwamitra, knowing that his disciple was poor, again said, 'leave, leave.'[2] When Galava was persistent, Vishwamitra said, somewhat in anger:

> In that case, get me eight hundred horses of the finest breed, such that their body is white, like the soft and silky moonlight, and one side of their ears of a dark colour. Now go, and get them.[3]

Galava was struck with deep anxiety. If he did not fulfill that demand as an offering, he would incur great demerit, probably even a curse; on the other hand, to get horses of that description would

1. Madhavi's story is narrated in the *Udyaga-parva*, Chs. 113–120.
2. Ibid., 106–19–21, 24.
3. Ibid., 106.27; 114. 14–15.

to her physical attributes, and, 'breathing hot and hard', pronounced his assessment of Madhavi. Its language revealed the man.

> The six parts of a girl that should be high are high in her: the five parts that should be delicate are delicate: the three parts that should be deep are deep: and the five parts of her body are soft red in colour, as they should be.
>
> Her buttocks, thighs, forehead and the nose, these six, are high. Her finger ends, hair, nails and the skin, these five parts, are delicate. Her voice, the space between her breasts, and her have, each of these three is deep. And the palms of her hands, the soles of her feet, the lower part of her eyes, these five, are of soft red colour.[12]
>
> To the gods and the asura-s alike, she is a sight to behold. Endowed with happy attributes of character, she is certainly capable of producing progeny.[13]
>
> Why, she seems to be someone who could give birth to an emperor. Now, keeping in view my own exalted status, say what her price is.[14]

Galava (to King Hayarshva)

> King! Give me eight hundred horses of the finest breed, such that their bodies have the glow of the moon and the one side of their ears is of dark colour. Giving this price, you can have Madhavi, from whom you can have several children.[15]

Hearing this, and already struck by Kama in his desire for her, Hayarshva said to Galava in a most ingratiating voice:

> Of the kind of horses you want, I have only two hundred at present. However, I have many hundreds of horses of another breed. Therefore, Galava, I will keep her, to have from her only one child. I will keep her only that long. Fulfill this wish of mine.[16]

As if her exchange for two hundred horses of a rare breed had nothing to do with her, Madhavi observed, from an inner distance,

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12. Ibid., 116. 1–2 (and the following unnumbered two verses).
13. Ibid., 116.3.
14. Ibid., 116.4.
15. Ibid., 116.5–6.
16. Ibid., 116.7–8.

untouched, the conduct of these two men, as she had earlier observed the conduct of her father.

Madhavi (to Galava)

> Once I received a boon from a sage who was truly a great soul, that *every time after giving birth to a child, I would be a virgin again.* So, sir, take from this king the two hundred horses he is offering in exchange for having me.
>
> In this way, you will have eight hundred horses from four kings. You will thus collect the *guru dakshina* for your guru, that you are worried about. And, in the process, I will have four sons.
>
> This is what I think. And now you may do as you consider best.[17]

No judgment on a man's crude selfishness could have been more devastating, no expression of a woman's total distance from experience more perfect, no laughter in '*you will have your eight hundred horses, and in the process I will have four sons*' more mocking. But far from being ashamed, Galava said to King:

> After paying the one-fourth of the settled purchase-price, you may keep this girl, but impregnate her only once, to have from her only one child.[18]
>
> Saying this, Galava left.

In good time, Madhavi gave birth to a son from Hayarshva, and he was named Vasumana.[19] Galava appeared thereafter to claim her back. 'It is now time for me to take her to another king, in order to get two hundred more horses of that rare breed', he said to King Hayarshva. 'Meanwhile, please keep with you in trust what is now *my* property, my two hundred horses.'[20]

Being a man of honour, Hayarshva restored Madhavi to Galava as promised. And Madhavi walked away from the splendours of the Kingdom of Ayodhya; for they had meant nothing to her.[21]

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17. Ibid., 116.10–13.
18. Ibid., 116.15.
19. Ibid., 116.17–18.
20. Ibid., 116.18–19, 22.
21. Ibid., 116.21.

Galava next went to the King of Kashi, Divodasa. On his repeating the proposal to him,

Divodasa (to Galava)

I have already heard the story. You do not have to say more about it. I feel honoured that, in preference to other kings, you have come to me with this girl. It is doubtless that this was destined. But I, too, have only two hundred horses with the one side of their ears dark. Therefore I too will keep her in order to have from her only one son.[22]

As if her exchange for two hundred horses of a rare breed had nothing to do with her, Madhavi again observed, from an inner distance, untouched, the conduct of these two men.

Readily accepting the offer, Galava gave Madhavi to Divodasa, and left.

Although it was exceedingly demeaning for Madhavi to be in a position of being bartered thus, the conduct of King Divodasa towards her, now his wife, if only for so long as she bore him a child, was of a very high order. It was of the same order, the *Mahabharata* lists the examples, as it was: *among the gods*, between Surya and Prabhavati, Agni and Swaha, Indra and Shachi, Chandra and Rohini, Yama and Dhumorna, Varuna and Gauri, Kubera and Riddhi, Bhumipati and Bhumi, Dharmadeva and Dhriti, Narayana and Lakshmi, Rudra and Rudrani, Brahma and Vedi; *among the more celebrated of the sages*, between Vasishtha and Arundhati, Chyavana and Sukanya, Pulatsya and Sandhya, Agastya and Lopamudra, Bhrigu and Puloma, Kashyapa and Aditi, Jamadagni and Renuka, Brihaspati and Tara, Shukra and Shataparva, Richika and Satyavati, Manu and Sarasvati, Narada and Satyavati, Pulatsya and Pratichya; *among the legendary mortals*, between Satyavan and Savitri, Pururava and Urvashi, Dushyanta and Shakuntala, Nala and Damayanti, Dhananjaya and Kumari—and, the greatest example of all, between Krishna and Rukmini.[23] Nothing could be of a higher order than the conduct of King Divodasa towards Madhavi.

22. Ibid., 117.4–6.
23. Ibid., 117.8–17.

In good time, Madhavi gave birth to a son from Divodasa, and he was named Pratardana. Galava appeared thereafter to claim her back. 'It is now time for me to take her to another king, in order to get two hundred more horses of that rare breed', he said to King Divodasa. 'Meanwhile, please keep with you in trust what is now *my* property, my two hundred horses.'[24]

Being a man of honour, Divodasa restored Madhavi to Galava. And Madhavi walked away from the splendours of the Kingdom of Kashi; for they had meant nothing to her.[25]

The completion of his mission on Galava's mind, for he had still to get the remaining four hundred horses of that rare breed, and thinking of nothing else, concerned with nothing else, he now made his way, with Madhavi, to King Ushinara, the King of Bhojanagar. On meeting him,

Galava (to King Ushinara)

> King! This girl will give you two sons, like the sun and the moon, they could rule over this whole world. Take her, and give me as her purchase-price four hundred white horses with the one side of their ears dark in colour.
>
> It is only to give them as *guru dakshina*, a disciple's offering to a guru, that I started this search. I have no use for them myself. If it is within your capacity to pay this purchase-price for her, then take her.
>
> You are childless, and those who are childless fall into a most dismal state of existence, akin to hell.
>
> Have two sons from this girl, doing great good to your ancestors and to yourself thereby.[26]

It was not for the first time that the grossest concern with one's self and with that alone, was taking the form of a touching concern for the *other*, when something desperately was to be gained from this *other*.

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24. Ibid., 117.19–20.
25. Ibid., 117.21; 118.1.
26. Ibid., 118.3–8.

Ushinara (to Galava)

I have heard what you said. Because it is destined, I have the strong urge to have a child from her.

But of the kind of horses you want, I have only two hundred, though I have many hundreds of other breeds. Therefore, I will take her in order to have from her only one son. I will take the same path which the others did.[27]

Neither is it possible for me to pay the entire purchase-money for her. The money that I have is the state's money, to be used for the welfare of the people, not for my personal purpose. Where the state's money is used for personal gains, such a state does not last very long. For there is no end to personal gains, and public money is always limited.[28]

Therefore, give me this princess, who looks like a girl from the world of the gods, *deva-kanya*, to produce only one son from her.[29]

As if her exchange for two hundred horses of a rare breed had nothing to do with her, Madhavi once again observed, from an inner distance, untouched, the conduct of these two men.

Praising King Ushinara highly for his just sentiments, and accepting his offer, Galava handed Madhavi over to him, and left.

In good time, Madhavi gave birth to a son from Ushinara, and he was named Shibi. Galava appeared thereafter to claim her back. He had meanwhile also taken from the other two kings, Hayashrava and Divodasa, the four hundred horses he had left with them in trust. Galava now had six hundred horses—and Madhavi. With them, he set out, for no particular destination, in the final desperate search for the remaining two hundred horses, of the eight hundred he had to give to the sage Vishwamitra.

On the way, he encountered Garuda, the Great Eagle, who had seemingly not followed in the intervening time the progress in his friend's mission. 'You look happy', Garuda greeted Galava. 'Not really, for I have still to obtain the remaining one-fourth of the stipulated *guru dakshina*, two hundred more horses with the one side

27. Ibid., 118.9–12.
28. Ibid., 118.13–14.
29. Ibid., 118.15.

of their ears dark in colour. And I am proceeding on that final search', Galava said.[30]

'You will never succeed in doing so. Make no more effort,' Garuda said; 'for there *are* no more horses of that kind in existence anywhere.' Garuda then narrated the story of how there were once one thousand horses of that rare breed, but in being transported across the river Vitasta, four hundred got drowned, and only six hundred remained. 'And those you now have.'[31]

Noticing the effect of total despondency, which that information had on Galava, and still wanting to help the dearest among his dear friends,

Garuda (to Galava)

However, I have a suggestion to make. In exchange for the remaining two hundred horses, and with the six hundred you already have, you offer this girl to Vishwamitra. In this way, you will be free of your worry for the rest of your days.[32]

Galava went to Vishwamitra, and said to him:

Gurudeva! Of the eight hundred horses of this rare breed you wanted as my *guru dakshina* to you, I have brought six hundred. In place of the rest, accept this girl. Three kings have had from her a son each. You, too, have a son from her.

In this way, I will be free of my debt to you.[33]

Having a good look at Madhavi, Vishwamitra said to Galava:

Why didn't you bring this girl to me in the very first instance? I would have had four sons from her. Leave her with me, and leave the six hundred horses in my hermitage.[34]

As if her exchange for the remaining two hundred horses of a rare breed had nothing to do with her, Madhavi one again observed, from an inner distance, untouched, the conduct of these two men, the guru

30. Ibid., 119. 1–2.
31. Ibid., 119.3–9.
32. Ibid., 119.9–10.
33. Ibid., 119.12–13.
34. Ibid., 119.15–17.

and his disciple. If she had felt like laughing at the guru's deep regret for the lost time—*Why didn't you bring this girl to me in the very first instance?*—she suppressed her laughter. But irony is always the unsuppressed mocking laughter of truth.

In good time, Madhavi gave birth to a son from the sage Vishwamitra, and he was named Ashtaka.[35] After endowing him with ample means of material prosperity and those six hundred horses, Vishwamitra restored Madhavi to Galava, who had meanwhile quietly appeared there; deeply satisfied that he had after all paid his *guru dakshina*, discharging the awesome burden of that obligation to his guru.[36]

What remained was for him to restore Madhavi to her father, Yayati. He did.

On his part, the father now arranged for Madhavi's marriage, in the customary style of a royal princess choosing from among the suitors the man she would take as her husband. With that in mind, Yayati moved from his palace to the hermitage he had built where the two rivers, Ganga and Yamuna, met in a confluence at Prayag, a most sacred place. Her story must have become well known; also that she was a mother of four sons. Despite that, many suitors, kings, royal princes, men of wealth, scholars and ascetics and men from different tribes living in the forests around Prayag, came to seek her hand in marriage.[37] Indeed, it looked like a human confluence. Madhavi, with a garland in her hand, meant for the human she would *choose* as husband, was escorted to the hermitage by her brothers Puru and Yadu.

Even as the suitors were being described and introduced to her, one by one, Madhavi tossed the garland in the air and declared that she was choosing *Vana-devata*, the forest, as her husband.[38] There was a profound lesson in that crushing irony.

After saluting her father, brothers, and relatives, and all those who had assembled there, and discarding her royal chariot, Madhavi

35. Ibid., 119.18.
36. Ibid., 119.19–21.
37. Ibid., 120.1.4.
38. Ibid., 120.5.

walked away, turned her face upon the selfish world of men, but without bitterness or reproach.[39]

Madhavi walked away untouched by the experiences she had had. That was the meaning of her saying, and that was the only thing she had said, that she was once given a boon that *every time after giving birth to a child, she would be a virgin again.* That was, in the voice of Madhavi, the *Mahabharata*'s universal metaphor that *true virginity is of the mind, and not of the body.*

39. Ibid., 120.6.

7

One's Sacrifice, another's Transformation

Kapota and Kapoti

The women of the *Mahabharata* include the womankind of another species as well—birds. Like the women of humankind, they portray what, in the midst even of their own anxieties and disaster, goodness can be.

Like most of the other stories in the *Mahabharata* concerning the human condition, the story of the two pigeons, *kapota* and his wife *kapoti*, who reform a cruel bird-catcher at the cost of their lives, is narrated in answer to an inquiry. 'What state of being does a person achieve in giving protection to the one who seeks it'? Bhishma then narrated this story.[1] Narrated in the *Shanti-parva*, the story speaks also of the central place of a wife in a man's life.

Once upon a time, in a dense forest, a bird-catcher was looking for a good catch. He was by nature a cruel man, and was therefore left with neither friend nor relative; for they had all given him up. He never did any good to anybody, least of all to himself. Everyday he would catch birds of different kinds, and would either sell their flesh after killing them, or sell them alive. That day, while he was hunting in the forest, a storm of great force arose, which uprooted many trees, driving animals and birds into a frightful state, each seeking shelter, for it had also started raining fiercely. The forest was flooded everywhere with streams of water, and soon it became dark, and very cold. Nearly frozen in his limbs, and scared too, he saw a small pigeon, a female, lying on a patch of grass who like him, was also shivering with the cold. He caught her and threw her in the cage. Although he was himself in pain, he still caused pain to another.

1. *Shanti-parva*, Chs. 143–49.

His eyes then fell on a huge tree, which was home to numerous birds that had built their nests on it. As he sought shelter under that tree, for he could neither walk nor stand, he heard the voice of a bird.

> Today, there was a storm, and it has rained heavily. My wife has not yet returned. What could have detained her and where? Will she be safe? Without her, my nest is desolate.[2]

Speaking in a language of great tenderness, of how he cherished his Kapoti, he expressed the meaning of *griha*, home, in which the wife occupied the central place.

> Having son, grandson, daughter-in-law, servants, a householder's home is still desolate without his wife.
>
> A house is not home. It is from the wife that the home derives its name. A household without the wife is only wilderness.[3]
>
> With one's wife, it is home even under a tree; without the wife even a palace is wilderness: of that there is no doubt.[4]
>
> For a man there is no wealth greater than his wife. Should he have no support in the whole world, his wife will be his support through the passage of life.
>
> To a man ravaged by illness, and forever in deep trouble, there is no healing greater than the wife.
>
> There exists no friend such as the wife, no recourse such as the wife. Nor there exists a companion such as a wife who helps one in the ordering of one's life.[5]

Trapped in the bird-catcher's cage, Kapoti heard those words of her husband; she said to herself that she was indeed most fortunate to be so cherished, whether she possessed or not, the qualities that he saw in her.[6] Then although in pain, at being caught in the cage of that bird-catcher, she looked at Kapota and spoke to him thus:

> What I will now say to you is to your good, and please do what I think you should. Offer protection to this bird-catcher, who is feeling cold and hungry. Do your *dharma* as a householder. You

2. Ibid., 144.2–4.
3. Ibid., 144.5–6.
4. Ibid., 144.12.
5. Ibid., 144.13–16.
6. Ibid., 145.2.

should not worry about me. To live your earthly life, you can always find another wife.[7]

Deeply moved by what his wife had said,[8] Kapota then asked the bird-catcher, who lived by catching and killing birds, if there was anything that he could do to help him in his difficult moments. For, he said:

> Even if one's enemy comes to one's home, one should receive him with hospitality. A tree does not deny its shade even to the person who has come only to cut it.[9]

The man said that he was suffering with the cold. Kapota threw down a heap of dry leaves and twigs, and also secured from the house of an ironsmith some fire, and made for the bird-catcher a small fire.[10] Comforted, and revived, the man said that he was hungry. Kapota said that, being a bird of the woods he did not accumulate anything by way of food, and lived only from day to day. There was something, however, which he could still do for a hungry guest. Saying this, he threw himself into the slow burning fire, so that the guest could eat some cooked flesh, and would be hungry no more.[11]

Shocked by that event, cruel though he was, the bird-catcher began to lament the kind of life that he had lived so far, spent in destroying birds, the gentle creatures of Nature. He reflected upon the kind of man he had become thereby,[12] and resolved to take a different path in life.[13] He released Kapoti from the cage, and threw away the cage and other instruments of his heartless profession.[14]

After he had gone away, a man transformed by another's sacrifice, Kapoti, in great sorrow but proud that by sacrificing his life her

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7. Ibid., 145.6–14.
8. Ibid., 146.1.
9. Ibid., 146.6.
10. Ibid., 146.10–12.
11. Ibid., 146.9–23.
12. Ibid., 147.1–4.
13. Ibid., 147. 5–10.
14. Ibid., 147.11.

husband had offered protection to the one who sought it, threw herself into the same fire, and perished—in the fire of protection.[15]

Kapota and Kapoti did not perish. For *such* beings do not perish.

8

The Undeniable Truth of Hurt and Humiliation, The Undeniable Necessity of Transcending Them

Draupadi

Draupadi was the daughter of Drupada, the King of the Panchala country. That was actually not his personal name, for 'Drupada' was a line of Panchala kings. The actual name of the Drupada King who was Draupadi's father, was Yajnasena.[1] Hence Draupadi is often referred to as Yajnaseni, or the daughter of Yajnasena, and more often as Panchali, the princess of Panchala. Again, Yajnasena the Drupada king was not her biological father for Draupadi was born from the fire of a *yajna*, a sacrificial rite that Drupada had performed in his prayers for a child. Her 'brother' Dhrishtadyumna was born likewise;[2] and Yajnasena the Drupada had adopted them as his children. Because of her dark complexion, Draupadi was also called 'Krishnā'. That she was born from the flames of a *yajna* fire, a most unusual form of human birth, is to be understood metaphorically; for her later life, at any rate the greatest part of it, would be lived in the flames of one kind of human fire or another, mostly in the flames of hatred and revenge that she let burn in her heart for thirteen years.

How Draupadi came into the lives of the five Pandava brothers, Yudhishthira, Bhimasena, and Arjuna, the three sons of Pandu's wife Kunti, and Nakula and Sahadeva, the twin sons of Madri, the second wife of Pandu, and married all the five brothers, happened in a way that was no less dramatic than any other part of her subsequent life with them till the very end.

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1. *Adi-parva*, 183.7.
2. Ibid., 183.7, 9–10. See also *Adi-parva*, 166.44–48.

After the Pandava-s had escaped an attempt on their lives by their malicious first-cousins, the Kaurava-s, they decided it would be safer to live incognito for a while, their mother Kunti with them, leaving the Kaurava-s to believe happily that they were dead.

Disguised as poor brahmana-s, they travelled in many parts of northern India, gaining experiences of every human variety. They were also to gain one very special person—as their wife.

News reached them of a *svayam-vara*—the ceremony where a girl publicly chooses her life partner—of the daughter of the King of Panchala, Princess Draupadi. They decided to go there.[3] On their way to Panchala, they saw a group of poor brahmana-s and joined them. Asked: 'From where are you coming? And where are you going?'—geographical not metaphysical questions, Yudhishthira said they were five brothers travelling together with their mother and that they came from the town of Ekachakra.

The brahmana-s suggested that they travel with them to Panchala where a festive *svayam-vara* of the daughter of King Drupada was to take place on that day. Talkative and informative, as the brahmana-s always were as a class, they had much to say about the young lady Draupadi whose *svayam-vara* it was going to be, about the young kings and the princes who were expected to attend, each hoping to gain her hand in marriage, and also about dancers, musicians, artisans, magicians, story-tellers, and professional wrestlers, and of course the priests, who would be heading towards the *svayam-vara* in the hope of getting rich presents and gifts that the opulent and generous kings would come loaded with to distribute.[4] 'After the fun of watching the spectacular ceremony of the *svayam-vara*, and getting the rich gifts and presents distributed on such occasions, you can return with us', the brahmana-s said to the Pandava-s.

But the brahmana-s also told the Pandava-s something else, which would turn out to be prophetic. 'All five of you are exceedingly handsome, have an impressive presence, indeed you look like gods: by some most fortunate coincidence Krishnā may choose one of you!'[5]

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3. Ibid., 182.12; 183.1.
4. Ibid., 183.7–16.
5. Ibid., 183.18.

And they pointed particularly to Arjuna in that regard.[6] Yudhishthira happily consented to travelling with them

Arriving in the capital city of Panchala with their mother Kunti, the Pandava-s made arrangements for their stay in the house of a potter. Because they were in disguise as brahmana-s, living on daily alms as the brahmana-s generally did, no one recognised them.

And they waited for what was lyrically but accurately described as 'the *mahotsava*, great celebration, of Draupadi's *svayam-vara*'. For many years to come, that would remain the only great celebration, in Draupadi's life!

It is significant that Draupadi's father, Yajnasena, had always cherished the wish, which he disclosed to no one, that he would give his daughter in marriage to Arjuna, of whose valour as an archer he must have heard much.[7] With that in view he had cleverly had a very strong bow and an equally strong bow-string made, so that only Arjuna could have handled it, or so he presumed. Also he had a special device installed, a fast rotating instrument with an opening in the middle above which an equally big object was placed as target, and the bow and the bow-string with five arrows placed below the fast rotating instrument.[8] It is clear that the whole thing was designed for Arjuna in advance, as it were. The significance of the father always wanting to give his daughter in marriage to Arjuna being stated at the very beginning of her story, would become clear in the light of an event that followed not long thereafter. Drupada had the archery contest at the *svayam-vara* announced far and wide, and also that the winner alone would gain Draupadi.[9]

In all that, Draupadi was not consulted although it was her *svayam-vara*, and she could have with perfect justice refused to be some trophy given to the winner in a contest her father had designed. But then, justice would be something Draupadi would not know for practically the rest of her life!

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6. Ibid., 183.19.
7. Ibid., 184.8.
8. Ibid., 184.9–10.
9. Ibid., 184.11–12.

On hearing of the contest at Draupadi's *svayam-vara*, many kings of the neighbouring kingdoms arrived. Also came Duryodhana, and with him some of his brothers, the Kaurava princes. With them came Karna. Many sages and ascetics and brahmana scholars had also come to watch the spectacular festivities. The Pandava-s arrived with their travelling companions, the brahmana-s, and sat with them in the same row, unrecognised. The Pandava-s would of course have noticed Duryodhana, but not Duryodhana, them. Drupada received the aspirants with ceremony; and seated them in the vast pavilion where the *svayam-vara* was to take place. A structure as magnificent as it was elegant, the pavilion is described, *unhurriedly*, in its smallest details. In the making of this, numerous artisans of every description had given their best talents, and been richly rewarded.[10]

Draupadi entered with a garland in her hands into the *svayam-vara* pavilion. Her beauty is described briefly, in words most imaginative, even seductive. This description is very different from the tiresome flowery language of the poetic conventions of those times in which a woman's beauty was described. Of Draupadi, it was simply said,

> *Even to those who had seen her many times, she appeared eternally new. Without smiling, she seemed to be smiling a heavenly smile. Without drinking wine, she seemed delightfully intoxicated. And without speaking, she seemed to be talking with her eyes.*[11]

She was accompanied by her magnificent brother Dhrishtadyumna. He stood in the centre of the pavilion and announced: 'Here is the bow; here are the five arrows; and there is the target. Whoever of you will pierce the target and bring it down, will gain my sister Krishnā as his wife. This I solemnly promise.'[12] Thereafter, Dhrishtadyumna introduced to his sister, one by one, by name, the kings who had assembled there to compete with each other for her hand.

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10. Ibid., 184.16–23.
11. Ibid., 187.27.
12. Ibid., 184.35–36.

Although the *Mahabharata* itself does not say this, or even hint, *a certain future was invisibly and most ironically also present there*: for among those who were being introduced to Draupadi, were some who would be her tormentors—Duryodhana, Duhshasana, Shakuni, Jayadratha, the main *dramatis personae* in her future humiliation and degradation.

In the visible person of Dronacharya and Ashvatthama, another invisible future was also ironically present, without any hint of it, even remotely. Draupadi's brother Dhrishtadyumna in the main, but Draupadi as well, were, as if mysteriously, connected with those two, father and son, in a horrible murderous relation that would manifest in a distant future.

Likewise in the visible form of Karna, who had come there with Duryodhana in the hope of winning Draupadi, as if mysteriously, Arjuña in the main was already connected with him. In actual fact, without knowing it, all the five Pandava-s were connected with him even in the present for Karna was Kunti's first-born. She had given birth to him when she was still unmarried; and for fear of disgrace had abandoned him soon after his birth, and had kept it a secret. The unacknowledged eldest son of Kunti, Karna, was the unknown eldest brother of the Pandava-s.

At Draupadi's *svayam-vara* two other great persons were also present: Krishna and his brother Balarama. With many of their kinsmen, they too had come to watch the *mahotsava*. Even though Kunti, the mother of Pandava-s, was an aunt of Krishna, a sister of his father Vasudeva, Krishna and the Pandava-s had not met until then: they would, for the first time, after the *svyam-vara* was over. A whole future of their close relationship was also mysteriously present at that *svayam-vara*.

If one were to read the long list of those who had come to the *svayam-vara*, and the families and clans to which they belonged[13], and also place them in the light of the future that would unfold in the form of the Great War between the first cousins, the Pandava-s and the Kaurava-s, it would seem that the lines of

13. Ibid., 185.1–24 (the whole chapter).

antagonists on both sides were already drawn and were present there in advance, albeit unknown. If it is legitimate to say anything about anything with the knowledge of the future that would unfold and become a known past of that thing, then it would appear, in the light of that hindsight, that Draupadi's *svayam-vara* was not a contest for gaining her but a contest for a kingdom, a *mahotsava* for a future Great War.

For the present, let us return to the *svayam-vara* pavilion.

After Draupadi's brother Dhrishtadyumna had announced what the contest was, and the prize, one young king after another tried his hand at the bow, each full of confidence that *he* would gain Draupadi. Not one could even string the bow with the bow-string and, exhausted even by that effort, collapsed.[14]

Seeing that, Karna, a master of archery, got up, picked up the bow and with the smallest effort strung the bow with its bow-string, and shot five arrows that could easily have pierced the target. But looking at Karna, Draupadi announced in a loud voice: '*I shall not marry the son of a charioteer, a suta-putra.*'[15] Karna put the bow down and withdrew with the utmost dignity but with a contemptuous smile playing on his lips, nonetheless. He would never forget the insult Draupadi had publicly hurled at him.

Actually, Draupadi had changed the rules of the game, and had reneged on the promise announced publicly; that *whoever* would pierce the target first would gain her. She was always free not to agree to be a trophy to be given to the man who would win the contest. From what her father and her brother had announced, she had no *choice;* from the very start it was no *svayam-vara* at all.

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14. Ibid., 186.15–20, 24–29.
15. Ibid, 186.23. The word *suta* generally meant 'charioteer'; but *suta* also denoted 'story-teller' or 'court-singer'. Karna's father Adiratha, not his biological father but the man who had picked him up from inside a floating basket in which Kunti had placed him and floated him on a river, and had brought up the infant as his own son, was professionally a charioteer. Karna was biologically the son of the Sun-god, *Surya*, from Kunti; but according to the Dharmic law, since Kunti was married to Pandu he was Karna's father. Karna never ceased to acknowledge Adiratha the *suta* as his father.

Karna could easily have made a somewhat legal point of it, a matter of principle, and put King Drupada and his son Dhrishtadyumna to their honour, but he was much too noble a man to do that: his manhood, his own sense of honour, would not permit him, besides, to take an unwilling woman as his wife.

Next Arjuna got up and walked towards the bow. Since he was disguised as a brahmana, there was among the brahmana-s present there, great excitement. Some were delighted; but many were highly skeptical of his success in something at which all those kings and potentates, all kshattriya-s, had miserably failed. Many were fearful, and said so, that this 'brahmana' would only bring disgrace to all brahmana-s and wanted him to be stopped from a foolish (for a brahmana!) adventure.[16] But the brahmana-s with whom the Pandava-s and their mother Kunti had travelled to Panchala to attend Draupadi's *svayam-vara*, tried to dispel their fears as unwarranted and praised Arjuna's physique. They had the greatest confidence that he would win the contest—and Draupadi.[17] Above all, they propounded a general principle in regard to the attitude to brahmana-s:

> There is nothing among human acts a brahmana cannot achieve. Physically weak or strong, whatever the brahmana-s take up, good or bad, happy or unhappy, big or small, one should not obstruct them in their undertaking, and insult them thereby.[18]

Quickly they cited a couple of famous examples of brahmana-s, like Parashurama, Agastya, who had achieved what had seemed humanly impossible.[19] However, this was just in the flow of their expressing faith and confidence in *this* 'brahmana', Arjuna, and not any serious theory the *Mahabharata* was advocating about the unlimited capacities of brahmana-s, always only too ready to believe it.

Arjuna saluted the bow; mentally saluted Shiva and Krishna; with seemingly no effort he strung the bow with the bow-string; took

16. Ibid., 187.2–7.
17. Ibid., 187.8–14.
18. Ibid., 187.13–14.
19. Ibid., 187.14–15.

the arrows and, with the utmost concentration, shot them at the target; and brought it down—to the great delight of the assembled brahmana-s and the painful disappointment of the kings and potentates.[20] King Drupada, not yet knowing the true identity of Arjuna, was nevertheless full of joy. Strangely, Yudhishthira with his other two brothers Nakula and Sahadeva left the pavilion and went back to where they all were staying.[21] Only Bhima remained with Arjuna. That, too, was an unrecognised intimation of a future pattern of relationships.

Amidst all the noise and din of human voices and the music and dancing that erupted on Arjuna's seemingly incredible victory, Draupadi approached him and, very appropriately, shyly, put the *svayam-vara* garland of white flowers around his neck.[22]

In flowery language which, if understandable in the flow of describing that event, was however wholly inaccurate as far as the facts of the cited examples were concerned, the narration of the *svayam-vara* concluded by saying: 'Just as Shachi had chosen Indra; Svaha, god-Agni; Lakshmi, Vishnu; Usha, Surya, the Sun-god; Rati, Kamadeva; Uma, Maheshvara (Shiva); Sita, Rama; and Damayanti, Nala; in the same way Draupadi chose Arjuna.[23] With his wife, both greatly honoured by the brahmana-s there, Arjuna walked out of the Pavilion.

The kings and potentates, all of them kshattriya-s, felt highly insulted that King Drupada, Draupadi's father, should have given his daughter in marriage to a brahmana! And they expressed in extreme language their feelings of anger and disgust at being insulted by Drupada, and resolved to kill him[24]—on principle, so that 'no kshattriya is ever insulted again; the kshattriya-dharma is protected; and never again the ceremony of a *svyam-vara* reduced to such mockery.'[25] To justify further their anger and resolve to kill Drupada

20. Ibid., 187.18–21.
21. Ibid., 187.26.
22. Ibid., 187.27.
23. Ibid., 187.27.
24. Ibid., 188.1–6.
25. Ibid., 188.11.

and his son, they also recited a principle of customary law: 'A brahmana has no right to marry a kshattriya girl in a *svayam-vara*; it is well settled that a *svayam-vara* is only among the kshattriya-s.'[26]

Their anger was directed at Draupadi no less: 'If this girl does not wish to choose her husband from one among us, we can throw her into a burning fire and go back home.'[27] 'But we will not harm that brahmana youth; for what he has dared, is entirely due to his immaturity. Moreover, we cannot, we must not, kill a brahmana.'[28] Then they all rushed towards King Drupada with a firm resolve to kill him, and he was fearful for his life.

Noticing what had begun to happen, Arjuna and Bhima, until then both unarmed, turned round, and stood in the way of those angry kings rushing to kill Drupada. Thereupon the kings resolved first to kill those two and rushed upon them. By now roused to great anger, and to protect his brother and Draupadi, Bhima uprooted a tree nearby, shook off all its leaves, and rotated in the air its trunk as a deadly weapon in his hand. Seeing his brother Bhima by his side, Arjuna was deeply touched. Arjuna picked up the bow and the arrows with which he had won the *svayam-vara* contest Meanwhile, unknown to them, unaware even of their presence there, a conversation was taking place between Krishna and his brother Balarama,[29] Krishna telling his brother that, in the disguise of brahmana-s, those two were undoubtedly Arjuna and Bhima. Also, very touchingly, many of the brahmana-s there ran to help Arjuna and Bhima, saying to them: 'Do not fear! We will all fight with you.' Smilingly, Arjuna said to them: 'You just stand near us, as spectators. My sharp arrows will stun these murderous kings just as you stun deadly snakes with the power of your *mantra*.'[30]

The *Mahabharata* then described the forerunner, a rehearsal, as it were, of what would happen with much greater ferocity a little more

26. Ibid., 188.7.
27. Ibid., 188.8.
28. Ibid., 188.9–10.
29. Ibid., 188.19–24.
30. Ibid., 189.1–3.

than a decade later—the fight between Karna and Arjuna, between Duryodhana and Bhima, and between Bhima and Shalya.[31] The vast festive courtyard of the *svayam-vara*-pavilion had become a miniature future Kurukshetra, the future battle field of the Great War, with the same chief opponents and players then as now. No other *present* ever carried within its womb so much of the *future*.

Karna, stunned momentarily by Arjuna's arrows, was also greatly impressed by him. He praised his valour and skill highly, asking him who he *was*, Parashurama? Indra? Or Vishnu himself? Or Arjuna?[32] Arjuna said: 'None of these. I am just a brahmana, who has received from his guru the knowledge of invincible archery.' Hearing this, Karna withdrew.

At this point, convinced beyond doubt that the two were Arjuna and Bhima, Krishna intervened, saying to the young kings: 'He has gained Draupadi lawfully. Now you should desist from your onslaught.'[33] Persuaded by Krishna and greatly helped by their own realisation that it could have been no ordinary man who could have faced Karna and forced him to withdraw, the kings withdrew and went to the respective camps where they were staying. Arjuna and Bhima, proud and very happy, with Draupadi walking behind them, returned to where they were staying, the potter's house.

Dusk had fallen and it was well past the time of a brahmana returning home after collecting *bhiksha*, the customary daily alms, Kunti was greatly worried about the safety of her five sons. As often happens in such situations, she began to imagine the worst.[34] Just at that moment, Arjuna and Bhima returned home—with Draupadi, and announced from outside: 'Mother! We have brought the *bhiksha*!' Without seeing what it was, the mother simply answered from inside: 'Enjoy it equally among yourselves.' It was only after she came out of the cottage and saw Draupadi, Kunti exclaimed in horror: 'Oh! What a terrible thing I have said!'[35]

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31. Ibid., 189.5–15, 23–28.
32. Ibid., 189.16–22.
33. Ibid., 189.38–39.
34. Ibid., 189.43–45.
35. Ibid., 1901–2.

Although the *Mahabharata* takes great care not to leave logical gaps in its various narrations, even in its narrations of the fantastic, in this case it was left unclear whether, Yudhishthira with Nakula and Sahadeva returned straight home. If so, they would most certainly have told their mother of the happy news of Arjuna gaining Draupadi, and she would not have then made that stupid but unwitting mistake; if they did not, then where did they go? They were certainly not at home when Arjuna and Bhima arrived with Draupadi.

Let us proceed with the aftermath of that most unusual reception to a bride. Kunti was now in a deep dilemma: how was a woman to be shared equally by five brothers unless she married all the five, which was inconceivable, given the strict code of monogamy for a woman, at least in the upper classes?

In order to understand the women of the *Mahabharata* and what they are teaching us, we must grasp one more characteristic of the work as a most systematic inquiry into the human condition. When a situation, a relationship, personal or collective, is being described, the *Mahabharata* honestly first states a given feeling towards the *other*, from which, as *the given*, almost everything else flows, a particular act or acts. Then it shows the familiar universal human habit of finding justification(s) for the acts, the more refined or crude depending upon the varying cultural skills in looking for, and quickly finding, an argument that will justify one's act(s). If a credible justifying argument cannot be found, then the recourse can always be had to some explanation located in a previous life. The *Mahabharata*'s honesty about human situations is most manifest in its narration of the story of Draupadi.

In the context of Kunti saying *Enjoy it equally among yourselves*, without knowing what Arjuna and Bhima had brought home, the *given* is stated in the text without any ambiguity: that all the five brothers, from the moment they had seen her, 'all their senses churned by Manmatha' desired Draupadi feverishly.[36] That meant she had to marry all five, not just Arjuna who had actually won her. And she did. But because a woman marrying five men, having five husbands,

36. Ibid., 190.12–13.

was unacceptable, even scandalous; there began the tortuous search for an argument that would credibly justify that act. The very first argument that came to hand, seemingly beyond question, was that, being a mother's command, *enjoy it equally among yourselves*, it had to be obeyed. To obey a mother's order was a perfect justification. The fact that it was no 'command' at all, but something which Kunti, without seeing what was brought as *bhiksha*, had unwittingly said, and later herself acknowledged,[37] was conveniently ignored. A show of fairness was made by Yudhishthira, the eldest son, when Kunti put her dilemma to him and asked him to decide. He said to Arjuna: '*You* won Yajnaseni! With Fire-god, Agni, as your witness, you marry her.'[38]

But having sensed Yudhishthira's attraction, too, to Draupadi, Arjuna promptly replied: 'That would be an act of gross *adharma*, the younger brother marrying while the eldest remained as yet unmarried. Save me from that sin. The proper sequence of marrying would be: first you, Bhima second, then me, and Nakula and Sahadeva after me. Decide in a way that will not violate *dharma* or the traditions of our family, and also keep in view what is good for the Kingdom of Panchala. We all will abide by your decision: with Krishnā (Draupadi), we all are under your control.'[39]

Fearing disunity among the brothers because of Draupadi, Yudhishthira was quick to decide: 'Draupadi shall be *our* wife, a wife to all five of us.'[40] Nobody asked Draupadi what *her* thoughts and feelings were on this subject. She acquiesced in the decision made for her; and not unhappily, or so it seemed.

Two events then followed in quick succession, both of considerable future importance to the Pandava-s: first the visit of Krishna with his brother Balarama;[41] and thereafter the visit of the the Pandava-s with Draupadi to her father, King Drupada.[42]

37. Ibid., 190.4.
38. Ibid., 190.7.
39. Ibid., 190.8–10.
40. Ibid., 190.16.
41. Ibid., 190.18–25.
42. Ibid., Chs.193–196.

Krishna came and introduced himself to the Pandava-s with the simple words: 'I am Sri Krishna'. He paid his respects to his aunt, Kunti. Then Yudhishthira asked him: 'We live here incognito; how did you recognise us?" The flattering answer was: 'No matter how the fire conceals itself, it will come quickly in view. Excepting a Pandava, who among men could have achieved *that*? It is a great good fortune that you escaped the fiery death planned for you by those wicked Kaurava-s. Now, so that nobody else may recognise you because of our coming here, we shall take leave of you.' Krishna and Balarama were not told about Draupadi marrying all the five.

Draupadi's visit to her father with the Pandava-s was preceded, but unknown to them, by a considerable amount of intelligence work by her brother Dhrishtadyumna when Drupada had asked him, after the *svayam-vara*: 'Where has my daughter Krishnā gone? Who has taken her? Is the man who won her of our *varna*, of our social status, or some low-born Shudra? Find out, I am worried.'

Although Dhrishtadyumna reported in detail what he had seen and overheard from the moment Arjuna and Bhima had walked out of the *svayam-vara* pavilion, taking Draupadi with them, unseen by them he had followed and the substance of the information he brought back was this: 'There is no room for doubt that the sons of Pandu escaped the attempt on their lives and, all of them still live disguised as brahmana-s; it is one of them who won the archery test to gain Draupadi. It seems that our cherished wish that we should have a marriage alliance with the House of Pandu, has been fulfilled.' Immensely pleased King Drupada next sent his family priest to visit the Pandava-s, to find out all about them by asking them direct questions as to their lineage, their *varna* and their *gotra*. In answer to those questions asked by Drupada's family priest, Yudhishthira said, stating a matter of principle:

> King Drupada had fixed a condition for his daughter's *svayam-vara*, that *whoever* brought down by his skilled archery that set target, would gain Draupadi. Nothing was asked about the lineage, the *varna* and the *gotra* or the character of the aspirant: none of these was any condition of the *svayam-vara* contest. That glorious young man gained Draupadi by fulfilling the condition King Drupada

had himself decided; and therefore he (Drupada) should not now trouble himself about those questions.[43]

That response could have also been Karna's to Draupadi when, just as he appeared to be piercing the set target easily, she hurled at him that insulting and wounding remark: 'I shall not marry the son of a charioteer, a *suta-putra*.' But Karna was much too noble a person to gain an unwilling woman by taking recourse to some intricate but unanswerable legal argument.

The priest had brought from Drupada another message as well:

> King Pandu being his beloved friend, King Drupada always cherished the wish of marrying his daughter to Arjuna, a son of Pandu, thus giving his daughter to Pandu as his daughter-in-law. If this wish of his could come true, he would consider himself truly blessed, indeed.[44]

Deeply moved, Yudhishthira now proceeded to assure him with the highest degree of probability that the young man who had won that contest, could only be a person of the highest lineage and character; an assurance which, accompanied by no conclusive proof either of lineage or of character, was nonetheless accepted only too readily.[45]

Presently a second messenger came with the King's urgent invitation to the Pandava-s, their mother, and Draupadi of course, to a feast at the Palace. The invitation happily accepted, they all went to the Palace, and were received with utmost honour by King Drupada and the women of the royal family. The sumptuous dinner over; questions regarding *varna* and lineage were asked again, this time by Drupada himself: 'and, before we begin to make preparations for the wedding, *what* shall we know you as, *kshattriya*, *brahmana*, some prosperous *vaishya*, or *shudra*? or, which I now believe, disguised as brahmana-s some gods who came ostensibly to watch the *svayam-vara* festivities but actually to gain Krishnā?'[46] The assuring introductions made, the 'sons of Mahatma Pandu, Kunti our mother, we five brothers *are*

43. Ibid., 192.23–25.
44. Ibid., 192.18–19.
45. Ibid., 192.27–28.
46. Ibid., 194.1–4.

kshattriya-s', the Pandava-s, with their mother Kunti and with their wife Draupadi, began to live at the Palace.

Before Draupadi's wedding to all the five Pandava brothers, there was the fullest and most instructive display of what was described earlier in these pages as a universal human characteristic of trying to justify by one argument or another what actually is plainly indefensible, and which the *Mahabharata* recounts honestly. The display of that characteristic followed Drupada saying to Yudhishthira in the course of that evening: 'Today is an auspicious day. Let Arjuna marry my daughter with due rites and ceremonies which I shall arrange next.' On Yudhishthira saying, 'you will have to arrange for my marriage too', Drupada suggested: 'well, then with due ceremonies *you* marry my daughter, or allow any of your other brothers to marry her.' Yudhishthira said: 'Draupadi will be a wife of us five brothers. Our mother has already commanded us to do that.'[47] 'Therefore, with the fire-god, Agni, as our witness, let Krishnā marry all five of us one after the other, and be our queen.'[48]

Scandalised by what he heard Yudhishthira say, the father said: 'That a man has several wives, I have heard; but a woman with several husbands, has neither been seen nor heard before. You are reputed to have deep knowledge of *dharma*; you must do nothing that violates *dharma*. You are a son of Kunti, how could you think like that?'[49] Yudhishthira promptly flashed that stock argument: 'The nature of *dharma* is so subtle and complex that we cannot, and do not, always know what *dharma* is.'[50] How this argument, right in its own place, began being misused to justify the unjustifiable, an intellectual alibi that came in handy in a difficult moral situation, is honestly shown by the *Mahabharata* throughout.

Drupada could only say: 'Whatever you, Kunti Devi, and my son Dhrishtadyumna decide to be the right thing to do, we will do it tomorrow at an auspicious hour.'[51] Draupadi was not consulted by anybody about what would be the right thing to do in that situation.

47. Ibid, 194.20–23.
48. Ibid., 194.26.
49. Ibid., 194.27–28.
50. Ibid., 194.29.
51. Ibid., 194.32.

Most conveniently, at that moment, the sage Vyasa, the patriarch of the joint family of the Kaurava-s and the Pandava-s, and the author of the *Mahabharata*, arrived there unexpectedly. He was received with every expression not just of greatest respect but of veneration; and in the next moments King Drupada sought his sage counsel on what had begun to trouble him deeply. He asked: '*How can one woman be a wife to many men*? Kindly guide us so that some deep offence may be avoided.'[52] Vyasa answered: 'I would like to hear what each of you thinks about what is *loka-virudhha*, apparently against public opinion, against the Veda, and against *dharma* too, but undoubtedly an intricate subject.'[53]

First Drupada spoke:

> In my view, it is decidedly *adharma*; for it is against what most people think, and against the Veda. That many men should have one woman as their wife, does not happen anywhere.
>
> None of the great and the good of the past ages ever behaved in that fashion.
>
> Hence I shall not consent to any such adharmic act. To me, it had always seemed extremely doubtful whether it was in accordance with *dharma*.[54]

His son, Dhrishtadyumna, Draupadi's brother, spoke next:

> Venerable Sir, you are a brahmana and have a sense of what is just, you tell us: how can an elder brother, being a man of high moral standards, also cohabit with the wife of his younger brother?
>
> Maybe, the nature of *dharma* being too subtle and intricate, we ordinary men cannot always decide rightly between *dharma* and *adharma*. Even so, that Princess Krishnā should be the wife of five men is thoroughly unacceptable to us.[55]

What Yudhishthira said in answer to this was truly astonishing. His first argument was: 'my heart is greatly inclined to this marriage, and *therefore* it can in no way be *adharma*.' He then followed this

52. Ibid., 195.5.
53. Ibid., 195.6.
54. Ibid., 195.7–9.
55. Ibid., 195.10–12.

up by cheerfully and triumphantly citing two examples from some obscure *purana* as justification: 'A girl called Jatila, a great woman, belonging to the *Gautama-gotra,* had married seven sages';[56] and 'Vakshi, daughter of sage Kundu, had married ten Pracheta-s who were brothers and had the same name'.[57] And finally he flashed what he thought would be accepted as absolutely decisive: 'To obey a guru's command is in accordance with *dharma*; and of all the guru-s, a mother is regarded as the highest guru. Our mother said to us that we should all share Draupadi equally as we would the *bhiksha*, daily alms, we bring. We consider Draupadi's marriage to us five brothers as wholly in accordance with *dharma.*'[58]

From what Kunti had actually said, and that too without seeing or knowing what they had brought as *bhiksha*, it was clear that Yudhishthira was plainly distorting the truth of what she had said. She had herself been horrified at what she had said. But now she decided to support him.[59]

In that exercise of *somehow* finding credible justifications for what the five Pandava-brothers had longed to do anyway from the moment they had set their eyes on Draupadi—to share Draupadi equally—the final decisive step, that satisfied everybody's conscience, was taken by the patriarch, Vyasa. He told Drupada that there was a secret concerning the whole thing which he would only tell him; and the two retired to an adjoining room for a confidential conversation, while the others waited for them.

That cosmic secret, Vyasa told Drupada, came from Draupadi's previous life in which she was the daughter of a sage. Worthy in every respect, endowed with many qualities, she did not find a worthy husband. Undertaking severe austerities, she had prayed to Lord Shiva, and prayed most fervently. Immensely pleased, Shiva had appeared and asked her to state her wish. 'Give me a worthy husband', she had said, *and repeated that sentence five times.* Granting her the boon Shiva that she would have five husbands. The

56. Ibid., 195.13–14.
57. Ibid., 195.15.
58. Ibid., 195.16–17.
59. Ibid., 195.18.

girl said, 'I prayed to you for only one worthy husband'. Shiva impishly said to her, 'but you repeated five times the sentence *give me a husband:* so, you shall have five husbands. Not in this life, though, but when you pass into another body.'[60]

Vyasa concluded: 'that girl was born as your daughter, Drupada. It has been determined already by the great gods Shiva and Brahma that your daughter Krishnā will have five husbands. And the Pandava-s have been chosen as those five husbands. Now, you do what you consider right.'[61]

Greatly pleased and relieved on learning that cosmic secret, Drupada, said:

If Lord Shankara himself has determined this, then whether it is *dharma* or *adharma* I am not accountable. None can change what has been destined. Let the Pandava-s marry Krishnā; Providence has made her their wife.[62]

By disclosing the secret of Draupadi's previous life, while Vyasa was doubtless providing a cosmic justification for a human act; his other self, Vyasa the author of the *Mahabharata*, was narrating with hidden laughter an example of human ingenuity in finding, however convolutedly, a justification for what was plainly indefensible, and then in believing it promptly. And that, is an important feature of the *Mahabharata*'s inquiry into the human condition.

With great pomp and ceremonies and festivities, in which the royal relatives of the bride and the people of the capital city of Panchala kingdom joyfully participated, Draupadi was given in marriage to the Pandava-s, one by one, in order of their seniority in age. King Drupada presented them with rich gifts; Kunti, exceedingly happy, gave her blessing and much sage advice to her daughter-in-law.[63] Krishna and Balarama sent them rich gifts, too.[64] After their marriage, and now very affluent, the Pandava-s lived most happily

60. Ibid., 196.44–50.
61. Ibid., 196.51–53.
62. Ibid., 197.1–4.
63. Ibid., 198.4–12.
64. Ibid., 198.13–19.

with their wife Draupadi in the capital city of King Drupada who honoured and loved them.

However, in another city, Hastinapura, the capital of the Kuru-kingdom, much was being discussed and planned by Duryodhana and Duhshasana in consultation with Shakuni, who was their mother Gandhari's brother, and with Karna, to bring about the complete downfall of the Pandava-s.[65] In view of Bhishma's and Vidura's strong opposition to, and even condemnation of their continuing machinations against the Pandava-s, the further plans were only held in abeyance for a while, not given up. Although Dhritarashtra, the father of the Kaurava-s, pretended happiness on hearing that the Pandava-s and their mother Kunti, having escaped that attempt on their lives, were alive; and pretended even greater happiness on hearing that the Pandava-s had married King Drupada's daughter; he was happy about neither. This did not escape the sharp eyes of Vidura, his half brother. To the Kaurava-s, tidings that the Pandava-s were alive and also married to Draupadi, was very bad news.

On Dronacharya's strong advice to Dhritarashtra, endorsed in even stronger terms by Bhishma and Vidura, that the Pandava-s be invited to return to Hastinapura, their paternal home, Dhritarashtra sent Vidura to King Drupada with the invitation, that the Pandava-s return home.[66] Vidura arrived in Drupada's court. Customary mutual respects paid, he extended Dhritarashtra's invitation to the Pandava-s very correctly through their father-in-law who, in turn, said that though he thought it was right that the brothers should return to their paternal home, he could himself not say this to them[67]. Fortunately, Krishna and Balarama were present there, and Drupada said, equally correctly, that whatever Yudhishthira, Bhima, Arjuna and Nakula and Sahadeva, and Krishna and Balarama decided was appropriate and right, and would be done. *Again, Draupadi was not included.* Krishna said: 'I think it is right that they return home'; and it was decided that they would.

65. Ibid., chs. 199–202.
66. Ibid., see chapter 205.
67. Ibid., 206.2–4.

Vidura called on Kunti, his dead half-brother King Pandu's wife, and told her about what was proposed to be done. Seeing Vidura, she was overwhelmed with inexpressible grief, and knowing intimately the Kaurava-history of hostility towards her sons, she could only say this: 'I have brought these five children up with much love and care, but now I really do not know what my duty is: you protect them: and let whatever is to their good, be done'[68]

With Draupadi and Kunti, and Krishna, Balarama and Vidura, the Pandava-s set out for Hastinapura, literally loaded with all kinds of gifts King Drupada had given his sons-in-law, and enumerated in some detail.[69] One thousand elephants, each with a golden seat fastened upon it and the elephant itself adorned with gold ornaments and equipped fully with arms; one thousand chariots made of gold, drawn by four horses each; in addition, fifty thousand horses of the finest breed; ten thousand female attendants, all wearing beautiful ornaments; one thousand armed male attendants; bedsteads, chairs, and household goods, all made of gold; and a hundred palanquins, with five hundred palanquin-bearers besides. All these, King Drupada gave to his daughter Draupadi as her dowry.

The Pandava-s arrived in Hastinapura to an ecstatic welcome by the people who were overjoyed that their beloved Prince Yudhishthira who had in his rule cared for the people, had returned.[70] There was, too, a most distinguished line of the elders of the realm waiting to receive them. Inside the Palace, Duryodhana's wife, a daughter of the King of Kashi, and other Kaurava women welcomed Draupadi, the new daughter-in-law of the family. Gandhari, the mother of the Kaurava-s, embraced Draupadi with much affection. Gandhari asked Vidura to make sure that the new bride entered her new home at an astrologically auspicious hour, and to make every arrangement needed for their comfortable and happy stay. None of them knew then that they would not be staying there for long.

68. Ibid., 206.unnumbered verses, Vol. 1, pp. 588–589.
69. See Ibid., 206.unnunbered verses, Vol. 1, p. 589.
70. Ibid., 206.14–20.

Soon thereafter, Dhritarashtra and Bhishma sent for Yudhishthira. Dhritarashtra said to him: 'My sons (the Kaurava-s) are full of pride and arrogance: they do not always obey me. I fear that they may again quarrel with you. I suggest therefore that, you take half of the kingdom as your patrimony, and go and live in Khandava-prastha.'[71] King Dhritarashtra next asked Vidura to make all arrangements for Yudhishthira's coronation; and gave him a long list of what was to be done. 'King Pandu had done me a great favour by abdicating his kingdom to me: it is right that, in return, I should now bestow it upon Pandu's eldest son Yudhishthira.' Bhishma, Dronacharya, and Vidura most enthusiastically endorsed Dhritarashtra's decision. Krishna even suggested that the sooner that was done the better: 'indeed, today itself.' Both Vidura and Krishna knew the vacillating and the ambivalent mind of Dhritarashtra regarding his nephews the Pandava-s and their rights. There were no practical difficulties as to that '*today itself*'; for Vidura had already completed all that was required to be arranged for the coronation ceremony. The coronation was indeed a grand spectacle. It did not least please the Kaurava-s, though and Dhritarashtra clearly sensed that.

After the coronation, Dhritarashtra called Yudhishthira and, in the presence of Lord Krishna particularly, said to him:

> Now that you have been anointed King, proceed to Khandavaprastha today itself. Once it was the capital city of the Paurava Kings: Pururava, Ayu, Nahusha and Yayati lived there. Later, it was destroyed. Build the capital city of Khandvaprastha again and restore it to its earlier glory. Many brahmana, kshattriya, vaishya and shudra will come with you and so will many more of those who are devoted to you. That city and the country are endowed with every variety of wealth. Therefore, go and live there.[72]

That 'khandavaprastha' was a city endowed with every variety of wealth, as Dhritarashtra described it, was a lie. It was almost simultaneously described as 'a deep dense forest',[73] an uninhabited,

71. Ibid., 206.23–25.
72. Ibid., 206. unnumbered verses, Vol. 1, p. 593.
73. Ibid., 206.26.

inhospitable, deserted tract of forest land destroyed long ago by a fierce forest fire. However, accompanied by Krishna the Pandava-s reached there and made it their home.[74] Soon thereafter, with determination and tireless effort, they turned it into a beautiful place, 'no less than heaven'. Krishna thought of god-Indra; and Indra, sensing why, promptly dispatched Vishwakarma the master architect and a master builder, instructing him to build the city of Khandavaprastha which would thereafter be known as Indraprastha. The *Mahabharata* describes in minutest detail the making of Indraprastha under the direction of the patriarch Vyasa himself, its amazingly intricate architectural design, the like of which was rarely found anywhere else, and the variety of people who quickly came and settled there.[75]

After a most moving farewell given by the Pandava-s and their mother Kunti; their gratitude to him expressed full-throated, Krishna returned to Dwaraka, his own capital city on the far-off western coast, after assuring the Pandava-s that the kingdom they had gained was nobody's 'gift' to them but their rightful patrimony.

There was something no less important than the making of Indraprastha that remained to be carried out by the Pandava-s—to determine the discipline of their respective turns of living with Draupadi, to ensure that that the new factor did not create any disunity among them. In recognising the psychological necessity of it, they were most ably assisted by perpetually travelling sage that Narada, who appeared on the scene unexpectedly[76] and was received with every expression of great honour. A wise observer of human situations, Narada quickly saw the potentially self-destructive possibility, even a high degree of probability, in five brothers having one wife. So to caution them, he narrated the long story of the two Asura brothers, Sunda and Upasunda[77] who, dangerous and exceedingly cruel to others, loved each other greatly, indeed gave the impression of being 'one soul in two different bodies';[78] but fought

74. Ibid., 206.27, 50.
75. Ibid., 206.29–51.
76. Ibid., 207.9.
77. Ibid., chs. 207–211.
78. Ibid., 207.19–20; 208.3–6.

over a nymph called Tilottama, saying fiercely to each other 'she is mine', 'she is mine', and, indestructible to men and the gods alike, killed each other.[79]

The story of Sunda and Upasunda was narrated in answer to a question raised in the *Mahabharata* as to how it came about when, all the five brothers were so greatly taken up by one woman as their common wife, that no disunity ever came amongst them?[80] The question presumed, in the light of much human evidence, that it would have been natural if it did. After gently asking Draupadi to withdraw to her rooms Narada privately suggested to the Pandava-s that they should, in order to preserve their love for each other, decide upon a discipline of the sequence of their respective approach to their wife.[81] That they did, in Narada's benevolent presence. It was agreed:

> Draupadi will reside in our respective homes for one year each by turns. Should any other brother encroach upon their privacy, he should voluntarily go into self-exile for a period of twelve years and, during that period, observe sexual continence.[82]

Yudhishthira being the eldest, his was the first turn with his wife Draupadi: Bhima's the second, Arjuna's, the third: Nakula's, the fourth: and Sahadeva's, the fifth. Although the *Mahabharata* does not mention Draupadi's response to this arrangement, it was said that 'they all lived happily'.

With an age difference of one year between them, five sons were born to Draupadi: Prativindhya from Yudhishthira; Sutasoma from Bhima; Shrutakarma from Arjuna; Shatanik from Nakula; and Shrutasena from Sahadeva.[83] In the story of Draupadi's life, one does not hear much about her five sons except at the very end.

* * *

It is somewhat inexplicable that while the *Mahabharata* inquired into every aspect of the human condition, into every kind of

79. Ibid., 207.19–20.
80. Ibid., 207.3.
81. Ibid., 207.18.
82. Ibid., 211.29.
83. Ibid., 220.79–86.

relationship, personal and collective, and in that systematic inquiry Yudhishthira was the main interlocutor asking questions from which the inquiry began, he never asked, himself the least of all, any question concerning Draupadi's feelings, both as a wife and as a woman in relation to each of her five husbands, and in relation to her situation itself. Those seemed to be of little or no consequence to everybody—excepting Bhima, her second eldest husband.

However, the *Mahabharata* provides us with considerable material from which we can understand Draupadi's feelings, not as *inference*, of which there can be more than one from the same human material, when by its very nature it is complex, suggesting several different things at the same time, or as any *interpretation* which, depending upon the reader's own history and inclination, can be and have been very diverse. The material the *Mahabharata* provides includes Draupadi's own often forceful articulation of her thoughts and feelings. The *Mahabharata* never stifled Draupadi's voice.

As regards Yudhishthira's relation with his wife Draupadi, it is abundantly clear, especially as the story proceeded, that from the beginning to the very end he was supremely insensitive to her feelings and thoughts, and behaved not as a truly caring husband or man but more like a learned professor[84]—Professor Yudhishthira—ready at every turn, to give her a long lecture on this or that. Whatever else Yudhishthira understood, and undoubtedly he understood much, there is hardly any evidence that he ever understood a woman's feelings and thoughts both as a wife and as a woman. We will see that as Draupadi's life unfolds.

Arjuna, who had won Draupadi at her *svayam-vara* contest, became what may accurately be described as a non-resident husband for a period of twelve years. He became something more during that period—a polygamous husband, marrying three more women, and frolicking with quite a few more.

How that long period of voluntary separation from his wife Draupadi came about may be told first in its briefest outline.[85] We

84. *I mean no disrespect to professors.*
85. See ibid., chapter 212.

earlier saw that in order to avoid any jealousies and disunity among them, the Pandava-s, on the wise urging of the sage Narada, had fixed a schedule of their respective turns with Draupadi; and it was decided, too, that should any other brother encroach upon the privacy of the brother Draupadi was with, he would voluntarily go into exile for a period of twelve years and during that period observe sexual continence.[86] One day when Draupadi was with Yudhishthira, Arjuna broke that discipline, not because of his volition but, placed in an acute moral dilemma, he was forced to do so. A poor brahmana had come to him seeking urgent help, for some robbers had taken away his cow. He was reproaching him bitterly that such a thing should happen in their rule; and Arjuna felt an inviolable obligation to help the brahmana. The Pandava-s kept their arms in one room; and it was in that room that Yudhishthira and Draupadi happened to be together. Arjuna had to enter the room to fetch his arms to rescue the brahmana's cow from the robbers. His duty to a poor brahmana done, he returned soon thereafter, only to announce that since he had violated a personal discipline, he would go into the stipulated self-exile for twelve years. Despite Yudhishthira sincerely assuring him that, considering the circumstances, he had done nothing offensive, Arjuna, protesting that he was a man of honour, set off on his self-exile. He was not alone. Many learned brhamana-s; ascetics, living on daily alms; story-tellers; and anchorites, chanting sacred lore, and narrating sacred stories; accompanied him. Indeed, it was a huge joyous caravan that travelled with Arjuna on his self-exile.[87]

They headed towards Gangadwar, which from ancient times was known, as it is now, also as Haridwar, where the river Ganga enters the plains, a place of pilgrimage. Drawn by its heavenly beauty, Arjuna pitched his camp there for quite a while. But there was another even more enjoyable reason for his doing that—a young Naga girl called Ulupi. One day when he entered the river for a sacred bath, she, already there, drew him into deeper waters, literally. Astonished, he asked her: 'Why did you do this? What place is this? Who are

86. See p. 163 above.
87. Ibid., 213.1–4.

you? Whose daughter are you?' She answered: 'I am the daughter of Kauravya, who belongs to an Airavata Naga family. My name is Ulupi. The moment you entered the river and I saw you, overcome by Manmatha, the god of desire, I nearly fainted with desire for you. It is only towards you that I feel this unbearably strong attraction I have felt towards none else hitherto. Give me the blissful joy of offering yourself as a gift, *atma-dana*.'[88]

Greatly tempted, Arjuna nevertheless felt the strong pull of principle. He said: 'I am under a vow to observe sexual continence for a period of twelve years, prescribed for me by my eldest brother Yudhishthira. At the same time I want to please you too. *You* find a way by which both can be reconciled, my pleasing you without doing injury to my *dharma*'.[89]

What followed was yet another example the *Mahabharata* gives, without being judgmental, of a cheerfully self-serving but seemingly credible argument being readily accepted because it offered an honourable justification to do what one was too willing to do anyway. Ulupi provided the justification Arjuna was eagerly seeking. She said to him:

> I know that you are under a vow to observe sexual continence, and I also know that among yourselves you laid a discipline that if a brother violates the privacy of another brother with Draupadi he will undergo a voluntary self-exile for twelve years and observe sexual continence that long. But that rule was only in *that* context. Here it will not pollute your *dharma*. You should also save the life of others.[90]
>
> By protecting me, you will not lose your *dharma*. And even if you transgress a discipline a little bit, just think how much greater merit you will earn by saving my life. I am your devotee, your *bhakta*, accept me.[91]
>
> If you do not, then be certain that I will not live, I will die. Observe the highest *dharma* of protecting a life.[92]

88. Ibid., 213.17–20.
89. Ibid., 213.21–23.
90. Ibid., 213.24–27.
91. Ibid., 213.28–29.
92. Ibid., 213.30.

You protect countless others; today, *I* seek your protection. Desirous of you, I seek a union with you. Fulfill my wish; and by giving yourself to me as a gift, *atma-dana*, fulfill my desire.[93]

Happily persuaded thus in the service of *dharma*, Arjuna spent a night with Ulupi at her home. The next day he came back to Gangadwar with her; but Ulupi, leaving him there, returned to her own home. She gave birth to a son by him, who was named Irawantam the Mighty Naga.[94]

Descending from the Himalayas, after making many houses and hermitages for the forest-dwellers, Arjuna with his human caravan turned eastward, visiting many places of pilgrimage in Bihar, Bengal, and Orissa, then known as Anga, Banga and Kalinga. His entourage took leave of him in Kalinga; and travelling alone along the sea-coast Arjuna then turned to the north-east, and finally reached Manipura, in Assam, and called on the King of Manipura, Chitravahana. This king had a daughter, Chitrangada, who caught Arjuna's eyes by a happy chance. Struck by her beauty, he desired her greatly. He went to the king and asked him for his daughter Chitrangada's hand in marriage. 'But who *are* you? Whose son are you, and what is your name?', the king asked him. 'I am a son of King Pandu and Kunti, and I am called Dhananjaya (another name of Arjuna).' Thereupon, familiar with Arjuna's family, King Chitravahana said to him that Chitrangada was his only child, and he had brought her up in every way as a son, and that it would be *her* first son who must carry forward the lineage of his family and inherit his kingdom: 'she and her son from you will live *here*: if this condition is acceptable to you as a bride-price, you may marry her.'[95] Arjuna readily accepted that condition; married Chitrangada; and lived with her in Manipura for three years.

After Chitrangada gave birth to a son, who was named Babhruvahana, Arjuna took leave of her, Pressing her tearfully to his heart, he then travelled south-wards, visiting many more places of

93. Ibid., 213.31–32.
94. Ibid., 213.33–36.
95. Ibd., 214.23–25.

pilgrimage. At one such place, he liberated by his touch a celestial nymph called Varga and her four other companions, all celestial nymphs, but cursed by an ascetic they had tried to seduce, to turn into crocodiles. Arjuna's touch restored them to who they were, celestial nymphs.[96]

After frolicking for some days with the five nymphs that he had freed from the curse into which they had fallen, Arjuna returned to Manipura, to Chitrangada, and said to her:

> May all manners of things be well with you, dearest! Live here, and bring up Babhruvahana well. At the appropriate time, you will come to Indraprastha and live happily there. You will meet my mother Kunti, my brothers Yudhishthira, Bhima, Nakula, and Sahadeva. You will be happy to meet them and my other relatives at Indraprastha.[97]
>
> In the form of Babhruvahana, it is my own life that exists upon this earth. Nurture him well; for he will perpetuate the family line of this family. By the law of succession, he is Chitravahana's heir; but biologically he belongs to the Pandava family. Bring up our son well. Don't grieve over my absence.[98]

Arjuna did not even mention the existence of his wife Draupadi.

From Manipura, Arjuna travelled to the west coast, to the pilgrimage region of Prabhasa. On hearing that his dearest friend Arjuna was in Prabhasa, Krishna proceeded to meet him. When they met, Krishna asked him why, he had left his wife and family and was travelling around; and Arjuna told him the whole story. Krishna put him in his chariot and took him to Dwaraka, where men and women of that city, especially the women, thronged the streets to catch a glimpse of Arjuna. The people of the tribes of Bhoja, Vrishni, and Andhaka, and also the royal princes of Krishna's household, accorded to Arjuna an ecstatic welcome.[99]

The anger they would soon feel against him would be much greater.

A few days after Arjuna's arrival in Dwaraka, there was a mountain festival, a huge carnival, on the Raivataka hill. When

96. See Ibid., ch. 216.
97. Ibid., 216.26–28.
98. Ibid., 216.32–33.
99. Ibid., 217.6–19.

Krishna and Arjuna were together at that festival, Arjuna's eyes fell upon Subhadra, the sister of Krishna, who had also come there with her *sakhis*. Bewitched by Subhadra, Arjuna could not take his eyes off her, '*kamagni*, the fire of desire, burned in him furiously'.[100] Krishna quickly sensed Arjuna's condition, and told him that the young woman was Subhadra, daughter of Vasudeva, and his sister, a much loved daughter of her father. 'If you are desirous of marrying her,' Krishna laughingly said to Arjuna, 'I will talk to my father about it.' Arjuna happily replied: 'If Subhadra, a Vrishni princess and your sister, can be my queen, I will consider it a great blessing, indeed. If what I can do to gain her is within human power, I most certainly will. Do tell me.'[101]

Krishna had some other thoughts on that subject. He said to Arjuna:

> A *svayam-vara* is a standard way of a kshattriya marriage, but its outcome is always uncertain, nobody knowing whom the young lady will choose. The more certain way is to take her away by force, considered by those knowing *dharma* as legitimate for a brave kshattriya warrior.[102]
>
> Therefore, Arjuna, my advice to you is: take Subhadra away by force. In case there was for her a *svayam-vara*, who could say who she would choose?[103]

Thereupon some trusted messengers were dispatched to Indraprastha with the speed of the wind to confidentially inform Yudhishthira and Bhima what was proposed to be done. Both the elder brothers gave their enthusiastic consent.[104]

Draupadi, of course, was not informed of these developments, much less consulted.

Krishna worked out a flawlessly clever plan for Arjuna to kidnap Subhadra when she was returning to Dwaraka from the hills of Raivataka.[105] Arjuna, 'assaulted by Kamadeva's arrows', lifted her,

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100. Ibid., 218.13–15.
101. Ibid., 218.17–20.
102. Ibid., 218.21–22.
103. Ibid., 218.23.
104. Ibid., 218.24–25.
105. Ibid., 219.1–8.

put her into the golden chariot Krishna had provided, driven by his charioteer Daruka, and drove off.

Very quickly, word spread about what had happened. Deeply offended by Arjuna's conduct, the warriors of the Vrishni, Bhoja and Andhaka clans prepared to chase Arjuna and punish him for insulting his hosts. No one was more scandalised and offended than Balarama, Subhadra's other brother. It is in his voice, that the *Mahabharata* expresses the strongest condemnation of Arjuna's indefensible conduct. Balarama no less angry at Krishna's silence, challenged him, saying:

> Witnessing what happened, why are you sitting silent?
> It was only to please you that we showed so much honour to Arjuna; but that low man deserved none of it.
> Insulting us grievously, and showing utter disrespect to you, he has abducted Subhadra by force, inviting his death thereby.
> Just as a snake would not bear being struck by somebody's foot, how can I tolerate that man stamping my head with his foot?
> I shall not tolerate Arjuna's transgression. Single-handed, I am perfectly capable of cleansing this earth of his whole clan.[106]

The whole assembly of warriors of the three clans supported Balarama's anger and disgust. Then Krishna spoke:

> No, Arjuna has not insulted our family. On the contrary, by doing what he did, he has shown his highest regard for us. Of that there is no doubt.[107]
>
> He knows that a girl cannot always be had by offering money for her. Which father will be so low as to sell his daughter for money?
>
> Arjuna knows also that the outcome at a *svayam-vara* is most uncertain, and which warrior will wait for a desired girl to be given away by a father in *kanya-dana*?
>
> Keeping all these in mind, he did what I believe is in accordance with the *dharma* of a kshattriya: abduct Subhadra by force.[108]

Krishna then sang a eulogy to Arjuna's, each line ending with the question: 'Who would not like such a man to marry in his family?' But, above all, he pointed out that it would be impossible to defeat

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106. Ibid., 219.25–31.
107. Ibid., 220.2.
108. Ibid., 220.3–6.

Arjuna in a combat, and gave reasons why. He finally advised his people to bring Arjuna back with Subhadra with honour, and have them married in Dwaraka. In a great celebration, Arjuna married Subhadra, and lived with her in Dwaraka for more than a year.

In this episode Krishna was advocating a principle: that kidnapping the woman one desired by force was in accordance with the *dharma* of a kshattriya. But the *Mahabharata* was teaching, in a most anguished voice, that all violence is a negation of *dharma*; and to take away a woman by brutal physical force was the grossest of all acts of violence to her, a manifest *adharma*. Violence was in accordance with no *dharma*, much less that of a kshattriya whose functional duty was to protect the weak and the helpless.

After spending more than a year at Dwaraka, Arjuna proceeded to Pushkara, another sacred place of pilgrimage, and it was there that he spent the rest of his self-exile before returning to Indraprastha thereafter.

Draupadi, who had by now learnt about Subhadra, said to Arjuna in, *pranaya-kopa* 'love-anger':

> Why have you come here? Go where Subhadra is. It is indeed true that however hard one may bind a relationship, it becomes loose on binding another relationship.[109]

With this, Draupadi began to cry; Arjuna consoled her and sought her forgiveness for his transgression. Arjuna had brought Subhadra with him, and she was introduced to the family. She was most respectful to Draupadi, and Draupadi, whatever her feelings, was most gracious to her, showing neither bitterness nor jealousy. Of course she knew nothing yet about Ulupi or Chitrangada; nor did Subhadra. We don't hear much of Subhadra in the life of Arjuna, or in the future life of the Pandava family. It was Draupadi who remained the most dominant figure till the very end.

Learning that Arjuna had returned to Indraprastha, Krishna and Balarama, the latter meanwhile reconciled to his sister's marriage to Arjuna, came with rich gifts for their sister and for the Pandava

109. Ibid., 220.16–17.

family. With them also came numerous notables of Krishna's clan. Krishna stayed at Indraprastha for a long while.

Subhadra, the fourth wife of Arjuna, gave birth to a son by him. He was given the name Abhimanyu, and from the very beginning was a special favourite of Krishna.

* * *

His relationship with other women apart, there was little to suggest that Arjuna had any deep feelings of love and caring for Draupadi. She was a beautiful trophy he had won, and that was that; but that never meant lack of respect.

Yudhishthira, the eldest of Draupadi's five husbands, was mostly insensitive and unfeeling in his relationship with her.

It was Bhima, her second eldest husband, who, until the last, truly loved and cared for Draupadi, both as a wife and as a woman. But that is best described as her life unfolded.

Nothing much emerged of Nakula and Sahadeva, the twins, in their relationship with their wife Draupadi—except that she had a child by each if them.

Draupadi lived through a time of glory for the Pandava-s. She saw the building of their capital town Indraprastha, a magnificent city. She saw the construction of many wonderful palaces, particularly the Mayasabha, the 'Assembly of Illusions',[110] in which several optical illusions were created: a dry space that looked like shining water; and places with actual water that looked as if they were dry desert; and some walls with illusory doors. Described as 'a unique wonder of architectural genius', it was in this *sabha*, Assembly Hall, surrounded with every conceivable royal glory, that Yudhishthira sat in court. She saw Arjuna, Bhima, Nakula and Sahadeva bring under Pandava suzerainty several kingdoms of the northern hilly regions, and of the east, west, and the south.[111] She lived through the glory

110. See the *Sabha-parva*, 1.10–18; chapter 3; 6.8–19; and chapters 7–11. It was called 'Mayasabha' also after the architect-engineer, Maya, who designed and constructed it.

111. For details, see the *Sabha-parva*, chapters 13–32, including the story of the killing of Jarasandha, the King of Magadha, who had terrorised people by his oppressive rule.

of Yudhishthira in the role of universal Emperor performing a rite called *rajasuya-yajna*, which was indeed a magnificent event.[112]

The *rajasuya-yagna* of Yudhishthira is described in great detail: its organisation; the various kings, chieftains, and the elders of the Kuru realm that came; the arrangements made for their comfortable stay; and the ever vexatious problem of the right protocol pertaining to the kings and the notables that had assembled there and the sensitivities it involved.[113]

And not only the kings and other royals, who came with immensely rich gifts and money as tribute to Emperor Yudhishthira, but also a very large number of brahmana-s, most of them priests who would be actually conducting the *yajna*. Many brahmana-s who were scholars, logicians, and poets, had come there and were given most generous gifts by Yudhishthira. Characteristically, five brahmana-s could not come together for five minutes without their breaking into convoluted arguments over this or that. It was with a great sense of humour, almost laughter, that the *Mahabharata*, in describing the vast concourse of the brahmana-s at that *rajasuya- yajna*, observed:

> One could hear coming from the assembly of the brahmana-s: *it should be done like this; no, it should not be done like that; it is so, it is so, not different.* Their purpose was not to prove the truth or the falsehood of a thing, but to just argue for the sake of argument, trying to show, by whatever logical means they could find, what was evidently true and strong as untenable and weak, and what was palpably weak and untenable as strong and true.
>
> Among them were brilliant pundit-s who had cultivated the habit of showing only defects in what the other was saying, and even before what was being said was completed snatch it in the same way as vultures in the sky snatch pieces of meat from the mouth of other birds.
>
> Among them were those who were experts in matters requiring decisions on *dharma* and *artha*. And there were those who, narrating deductive stories from past traditions, felt happy and made others happy, too.[114]

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112. For details, see Ibid., chs. 33–36.
113. See the *Sabha-parva*, 33.26–53; ch. 35.
114. Ibid., 36.2–7.

Despite perfect planning, even the seemingly insignificant details taken care of, two things happened at that *rajasuya-yagna* that were exceedingly ugly. Draupadi had nothing to do with either of them. However, what was happening in the lives of the Pandava-s was happening in her life as well.

The first of the two ugly events, even as that *rajasuya-yagna* was being conducted, was Krishna killing Shishupala, the king of Chedi. That event is narrated here only briefly.[115]

A part of the ritual of the *rajasuya-yajna* was to first choose from among the guests a most honoured person, and then, in a ceremony called 'the offering of the *ardhya*', ritualistically offer him the highest honour. On the advice of Bhishma, the eldest of the Kuru realm, who had come for that *yagna*, Yudhishthira chose Krishna for being given the *ardhya*. Just when the ceremony began, Shishupala, the king of Chedi, got up and strongly objected to that highest honour being conferred upon Krishna.

Shishupala first challenged Yudhishthira; questioning every ground on which Krishna was selected for the *ardhya*-honour.[116] In the gentlest of tones, Yudhishthira tried to pacify Shishupala, but in vain.[117] In an increasingly offensive manner, hurling upon him insults and abuses, Shishupala then questioned Bhishma as to how he could suggest Krishna as the recipient of that highest honour.[118] Bhishma's answer to Shishupala was a eulogy of Krishna not as a man but as incarnation of God.[119] Full of hatred for him, Shishupala next turned upon Krishna, and in language abusive and foul, asked how, knowing his true status, *he* could accept that honour.[120] Thereafter he incited the assembled kings into believing they had been insulted; and they all arose to attack the Pandava-s and Krishna. That was the limit of Krishna's tolerance.

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115. The narration of the Shishupala-killing, the culmination of a previous history, covers practically ten long chapters, 36 to 45.1–37, in the original text, the *Sabha-parva*, of the *Mahabharata*.
116. *Sabha-parva*, 37.1–3, 5–17.
117. Ibid., 38.1–5.
118. Ibid., 37.3–5; ch. 41; ch.44.
119. Ibid., 38.6.29.
120. Ibid., 37.25–30.

Tracing the history of Shishupala's antagonism to him and to his people, Krishna said that he had once promised Shishupala's mother that he would forgive a hundred offenses of her son but no more: the latter having crossed that limit, Krishna cut his head off with his celestial discus. All the kings assembled there were then subdued into a spirit of submission; the *yajna* was completed.

In a deeper sense the killing of Shishupala was a bad omen for the future not only of the Pandava-s but also of the kshattriya-s as a class. The venerable Vyasa, the patriarch of the Kuru-Pandava family (and the author of the *Mahabharata)* who saw the event, predicted that future.[121] On Yudhishthira asking whether, with the killing of Shishupala, the three main kinds of cosmic disturbances had been pacified, Vyasa said: 'Thirteen years is the normal cycle of the effects cosmic disturbances produce. The disturbance that was created today will lead to the annihilation of the kshattriya-s. With you as the main cause, the kshattriya kings, fighting each other, will destroy themselves.'[122]

The second ugly event took place after the *yajna* was over. All the kings had left; but Duryodhana had stayed back, and was taking a tour of the Mayasabha, 'the Assembly of Illusions', the like of which he had never seen before. He came to a place where the floor, made of crystals, falsely looked like a pool of water when in fact it was dry. Thinking that there was water, he instinctively pulled his clothes above the knee, and was highly embarrassed realising it was only an optical illusion.[123] At another place, where there was actually a pool of clear water but, not wanting to make the same mistake as before, he thought that the surface was dry, he confidently walked over it, only to fall with a splash into the pool of water.[124] Witnessing that scene, Bhima, Nakula and Sahadeva laughed derisively, and so did their attendants: however, 'on the orders of the King', Duryodhana was given a fresh set of clothes[125]. But he never forgot their insulting

121. Ibid., 46.7–17.
122. Ibid., 46. 11–12.
123. Ibid., 47.4–5; also 50.25–26.
124. Ibid., 47.6; also 50.29–30.
125. Ibid., 47.7–9; also 50.31.

and uncivilised conduct. Duryodhana was not only their eldest first cousin but was also an invited guest at the *rajasujya-yajna*.

Did Draupadi also laugh at Duryodhana when he made those mistakes under an optical illusion? Among those acquainted, not always accurately, with some of the main events of her life, the general impression is that she did. But is that of any importance in the narrative of her life? Important or not, the question is one of fact as narrated, Draupadi as portrayed in the *Mahabharata* and not the Draupadi of general impressions about her, thus a question of accuracy and truth, even if they be about a mythic figure. Both the Northern and the Southern Recensions[126] of the *Mahabharata* include Draupadi amongst those who had laughed at Duryodhana's discomfiture. It is to be noted, though, that the text in the Northern Recension where the episode is first described does not mention her but only Bhima and Nakula and Sahadeva as those who had laughed.[127] Only later, when Duryodhana woefully reported to his father those two episodes, not only was Draupadi (and her women attendants) but also Krishna and Arjuna included amongst those who had laughed mockingly at Duryodhana.[128] It was only in his recollection, already heated with his admitted intense jealousy of the glorious prosperity of the Pandava-s, that Draupadi was brought in.

This division in the text would seem to suggest that Draupadi was nowhere around when Duryodhana took that disastrous tour (for him) of the Mayasabha. This is further supported by his acknowledgement, even if in recollection, that:

> *Every day in that yajna, Draupadi would, without herself eating, first supervise how many persons, including those that were physically deformed, had been served food and how many remained to be fed.*[129]

126. See, for example, the *Sabha-parva* in the Southern Recension of the *Mahabharata* edited by P.P.S. Sastri (1932), Vol. III, 50.1–10. See also his 'Introduction' to the *Sabha-parva*, pp. v–xvi.
127. Ch. 47. 4–5 and 47.6.
128. Ibid., 50.30.
129. Ibid., 52.48.

It should be clear that Draupadi had much nobler things to do than to take position in advance exactly where Duryodhana was likely to make those mistakes and laugh derisively when he did. That she and her women attendants had laughed at Duryodhana's discomfiture was perhaps another product of his highly excited state of mind, is clearly suggested by the text.

Duryodhana's discomfiture did not end with his imagining water where it was dry, and imagining a dry surface where there was a pool of water. As he proceeded on his tour of Mayasabha, he next saw a wall with what looked like a door of bright crystals. On trying to enter what he thought was really an open doorway, he hit his head against solid wall, and his head was slightly bruised.[130] Soon thereafter he saw another wall with a door made of crystals. Thinking that that was yet another illusory door that was closed, he playfully pushed it as if opening it: it turned out to be a real open doorway that was not bolted from inside, and because he had applied great force on a door that was already open, he fell on the other side of the door.[131]

Like the two earlier happenings, these two are described, again, at two different places, the second time as Duryodhana's recollections of them. And it was in his recollection of them, along with his long intense lament of jealousy at the incredible glory of the Pandava-s he had seen at that *rajasuya-yajna*[132], that Duryodhana mentioned Bhima laughing when he hit his head against that solid wall, and addressing him rudely as '*Dhritarashtra-putra*', 'son of Dhritarashtra'.[133] But Duryodhana also mentioned Nakula and Sahadeva who, on seeing him hurt himself, rushed to him, held him in their arms, comforted him, and repeatedly said: 'King! Come this way. The door is on this side'[134]

Duryodhana was now feverishly looking for another door—the door to the destruction of the Pandava-s, and thus the destruction of

130. Ibid., 47.11.
131. Ibid., 47.12.
132. For which see the *Sabha-parva*, 47.22–40; 49.12–36; 50.17–36; 51.1.35; 52.1–49; and 53.1–6
133. Ibid., 50.35.
134. Ibid., 50.32–34.

Draupadi. Lamenting his state of mind, desperate with envy, he asked Shakuni, his mother Gandhari's brother, 'Which side is *that* door?' Shakuni said:

> 'I will show you *that* door. Invite Yudhishthira to a game of dice.' Yudhishthira loves gambling; but he is not very good at it. I am adept in that game, and there is hardly anyone who can match me. I am also an adept in cheating with the dice, so that I always win the game, even if dishonestly. I will get for you Yudhishthira's incredible wealth. Explain all this to your father, King Dhritarashtra, and secure his permission: that work, you will have to do, I cannot do it.[135]

* * *

After much sage advice that gambling does no one any good, and that he should now give up his hostility towards his cousins, the Pandava-s, Dhritarashtra eventually permitted his son to set up the game. That was after Duryodhana threatened to kill himself if he was not allowed to destroy Yudhishthira. A most reluctant Vidura was sent to Yudhishthira with an invitation to play. The words of Dhritarashtra's invitation were as deceitful as was the spirit behind it. 'As you have built at Indraprastha, we have built here as magnificent a *sabha*: come and have fun with your cousins, playing the game of dice.' The invitation promptly accepted, given Yudhishthira's love of gambling, Vidura saw in that a disastrous future, and said so to Dhritarashtra.

Draupadi knew nothing about the Kaurava-invitation to the game of dice or its acceptance. She was, of course, with Yudhishthira when with his brothers, he set out in great style for Hastinapura. She would soon learn the purpose of that visit. Its flames would engulf her the most.

Before the game began, Yudhishthira expressed his apprehension that there was cheating in all gambling. Shakuni answered:

> What you call 'cheating' is in fact only one's superior skill at the game. Just as a man of greater learning with his skill in using it,

135. *Sabha-parva*, 48.19–23; also 49.37–40.

defeats the opponent with inferior knowledge, but that is not called 'cheating', likewise in gambling.

However, if you fear that you would be cheated in the game of dice we would be playing, you are free not to play, and withdraw.[136]

One detail remained to be settled. 'Who will play opposite me?' Yudhishthira asked Duryodhana, whose answer was: 'I will provide the money and the material for the stakes, but Shakuni, my uncle, will play the game on my behalf.' Yudhishthira said: 'That someone else should play on behalf of another, seems to me to be thoroughly wrong. Even so, let the game begin'.[137] And the game began. Many of the elders of the Kuru-clan, Bhishma, Dronacharya, Kripacharya, and Vidura had come to watch the game; with unhappy minds, though.

At every throw of the dice, Yudhishthira lost whatever he put at the stake, successively all the items of his immense wealth. Assuming that he being the eldest in the family, his younger brothers were his property, something they did not question directly, he next put at the stake, one after the other, Nakula, Sahadeva, Arjuna and Bhima—and lost.

His next stake was his own self; and again he lost. They were all now 'slaves', nominally to King Dhritarashtra but actually to Duryodhana. Yudhishthira attributed that dramatic turn, just the day before a universal Emperor and now a slave to, *daiva*, destiny, that none could alter. From the moment he had received the invitation to that game of dice at Hastinapura and had accepted it, he had begun claiming that he was in the hands of a destiny none could alter. This was even after Vidura had honestly warned him of what the real motive behind that invitation was.

Yudhishthira had lost everything he had. With a wicked smile, Shakuni said to him:

You still have Draupadi. Play again, with her as the stake. Maybe you will win back all that you have lost.[138]

Yudhishthira played again, putting Draupadi as the stake, even if reluctantly.

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136. Ibid., 59.7–8, 14–17.
137. Ibid., 59.19–21.
138. Ibid., 65.32.

With a final throw of the dice, Shakuni exclaimed, to the great delight of Duryodhana and his brothers, but to the horror of all others present there: 'This game, too, I have won.' He announced this to all the kings present there.

What was the status of Draupadi now in relation to the Kaurava-s?

Duryodhana quickly dispatched one of his attendants, Pratikami by name, to inform Draupadi that she was now Duryodhana's 'slave', and told him to bring her there. Pratikami narrated to her how, 'intoxicated with gambling', after Yudhishthira had lost at every throw of the dice all his wealth, *things*, he had next put at the stake *human beings* as his wealth, his four younger brothers, then his own self, and finally her, and had lost all. She was, as they were, now Duryodhana's slave. Pratikami said that he had come to take her to King Dhritarashtra's palace to work as a 'slave'.

Deeply shocked, but disbelieving of what she was told, Draupadi questioned Pratikami: 'How *can* you say such a thing? Which Prince will gamble, with his wife as stake? Was King Yudhishthira so intoxicated with gambling that he had no other wealth left than his wife to gamble with as stake?'[139] Pratikami reiterated his account.

Draupadi (to Pratikami)

> Go back to the Assembly, and ask the Gambler King (Yudhishthira): '*whom did you lose first: your own self or me?*'
>
> It is only after I know the answer to this that this weak and helpless woman will come to the Assembly.[140]

Pratikami conveyed Draupadi's question to Yudhishthira: 'whom did you lose *first*, your own self or me?' Nearly lifeless after what had happened, Yudhishthira said nothing, but Duryodhana did: 'Let Draupadi come here and ask him that question herself, so that all who are here may hear his answer.'[141]

Deeply pained, Pratikami retuned to Draupadi and said:

> Princess! Duryodhana insists that you come to the Assembly. It seems to me that the time has come for the ruin of the Kaurava-s.

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139. Ibid., 67.5.
140. Ibid., 67.7–8.
141. Ibid., 67.12.

> Duryodhana has fallen so low that he dares summon you to the Assembly. He will never be able to protect and preserve his flourishing fortunes.[142]

Draupadi sent him back, saying that she would seek the guidance of the elders as to what she should do in that circumstance, and she would act accordingly. They know what *dharma* is. Pratikami asked the Assembly what answer he should give to Draupadi? Thereupon, angry with Pratikami, Duryodhana asked his brother Duhshasana to bring her. He went to the palace where Draupadi was, and spoke to her rudely:

> Come, Panchali, come. You have been won in a gambling game. We have you lawfully. Don't be bashful: pay attention to Duryodhana. Serve the Kaurava-s, and come to the Assembly.[143]

Duhshasana looked menacing. Draupadi ran towards where the elderly Kaurava women were. But he caught hold of her by her long black hair, and dragged her to the Assembly.

Draupadi (to Duhshasana)

> You wicked man! I am menstruating, and I have on my body one garment only. In this condition it is wholly improper for me to appear in the Assembly where there are elders, who are like father to me. Desist from what you are doing.[144]

Duhshasana (to Draupadi)

> Yajnaseni! Whether you are menstruating, or clad in one garment only, or naked, we have won you in that game of dice, and you are now our slave. Hereafter you shall live like our slave and act on our bidding.[145]

It was in this setting that Draupadi was described as 'having husband, yet destitute', 'having husband, yet a widow', *nathavati-anathavata*,[146] a phrase applied to her almost like a personal name

142. Ibid., 67.14.
143. Ibid., 67.27, 36–37.
144. Ibid., 67.32.
145. Ibid., 67.34.
146. Ibid., 67.31.

in much of what has been written about her, although there are countless women in the world to whom this phrase *nathavati-anathavata* can unfortunately but rightly be applied.

Like an animal, Draupadi was dragged by her hair into the Royal Assembly. She said to Duhshasana:

> 'To have dragged me, a woman menstruating, into this Kaurava Assembly was an exceedingly sinful act. But I can see that not one Kaurava is condemning your act, seemingly all of you are of the same inclination.'[147]
>
> Draupadi continued not just her lament but her moral indictment It seems that no moral strength is left in Dronacharya, Bhishma, Vidura, and in King Dhritarashtra. It must be for that reason that these respected elders are taking no notice of Duryodhana's beastly oppressive acts.[148]
>
> Let all the members of this Assembly answer my question: 'Was I won (in that game of dice) in accordance with *dharma*?'
>
> The elders of the Kuru-family present here have sons and daughters-in-law. Let them reflect on my question and answer it justly.[149]

Draupadi also looked challengingly at her five-Pandava husbands, now slaves to Duryodhana and therefore pitiably helpless. Noticing that desperate helpless look, Duhshasana, laughing loudly, called her 'slave', *dasi*.[150] Karna also laughed loudly, and so did Shakuni.[151]

Meanwhile, Draupadi's question still rang in the air.

Bhishma (to Draupadi)

> Dear daughter-in-law! The nature of *dharma* being exceedingly subtle, I am not able to examine your question. It is true that what one does not own, one cannot put at the stake; but it is a common belief and generally seen that a woman is always under the control of her husband. In view of these mutually opposing positions, but each right in its own place, I am not able to say anything definitely.[152]

147. Ibid., 67.39–40.
148. Ibid., 67.41.
149. Ibid., 67.52.
150. Ibid., 67.44.
151. Ibid., 67.45.
152. Ibid., 67.47.

> Yudhishthira, known as Dharmaraja, can renounce the whole world but not *dharma*. And because he himself declared that, no longer master of his self, he could not decide on your question, I am not able to say anything definitely.[153]
>
> Indisputably Shakuni has no parallel in his knowledge and skill of gambling. And it may be that he motivated Yudhishthira to gamble, with you as the stake. But Yudhishthira himself does not regard that as 'cheating' on Shakuni's part. Therefore I am not able to say anything definitely.[154]

The *Mahabharata* itself shows very candidly how '*the nature of dharma is subtle*' and was often used, cynically but effectively, as an intellectual and convenient escape from the morally difficult situations. But since the problem of two mutually opposing positions, each right in its place, has always remained, one cannot judge with certainty when it is cynical misuse and when genuinely legitimate.

In the present situation of Draupadi, two different things simultaneously demanded a clear response: her question and Duhshasana's ignoble conduct towards her, a decision on the one, and the condemnation and stopping of the other. There was neither, only deafening silence: yet, not completely. Vikarna, one of the Kaurava-s, like Duhshasana a younger brother of Duryodhana, a much lesser figure than Bhishma, and never heard of again, spoke.[155] Strongly regretting the silence of even Bhishma and King Dhritarashtra, the two eldest of the Kuru-family, and repeatedly urging the kings present in the Assembly to answer Draupadi's question, but on their maintaining silence still, Vikarna said:

> Whether, or not, *you* answer Draupadi's question, *I* shall; and I will say what I consider just and right.
>
> Kings have four unfortunate addictions: hunting, drinking, gambling, and excessive sensual pleasure. Addicted to them, they transgress every form of justice.
>
> Given his lust for gambling, and urged by dishonest gamblers, Yudhishthira gambled, putting his wife Draupadi at stake. But she

153. Ibid., 67.48.
154. Ibid., 67.49.
155. Ibid., 68.11–24.

is not his wife alone; she is equally the wife of his other four brothers. Besides, before he put her at the stake, he had already put his self at the stake and had lost, having no freedom anymore, owning nothing anymore in any case.

For these reasons, I do not regard Draupadi as won in accordance with justice and fair play.[156]

The Assembly applauded Vikarna. But applause was not what was then required. What was required, even more than answering Draupadi's question, was the Assembly exercising its authority to stop Duhshasana's ignoble conduct towards her first. It did not. King Dhritarashtra, Bhishma, Vidura, Dronacharya, and Kripacharya, all men of immense authority, remained silent spectators of a woman degradation and humiliation. They were men of authority, yet morally impotent in the present situation. Encouraged by this, and angry with Vikarna for defending Draupadi, Karna spoke to him hard and nasty words:[157]

He called Vikarna 'a fool', 'immature', 'a man of little knowledge posing as wise'. As regards Draupadi's question, Karna interpreted the Assembly's silence itself as its decision. 'Even after her repeated urging for an answer, if the Assembly remained silent, it is because it considers Draupadi as having been won in accordance with *dharma*, that is, justly and fairly.'[158] Karna had said this clearly and openly in the Assembly, but none in the Assembly corrected him that it was a wrong interpretation. That further strengthened Karna's argument as regards her status, that she was now a *dasi*, 'slave', of Duryodhana. He addressed her directly:

Karna (to Draupadi)

A slave, a son, and a wife, these three do not own wealth. The master of the slave has a right also over the wife of the one who, on losing all that he had, is now a slave.[159]

Princess! Therefore, you had better go and serve Duryodhana's household. That is what you are being asked to do. From now, all

156. Ibid., 68.19–24.
157. Ibid., 68.27–37.
158. Ibid., 68.28.
159. Ibid., 71.1.

the sons of Dhritarashtra, and not the sons of Kunti, are your master.[160]

Yajnaseni! Yudhishthira, Bhima, Arjuna, Nakula and Sahadeva, lost themselves at the stake in that game of gambling, and are now slaves. You, too, being their wife, are likewise a slave. These defeated (in the game of dice) Pandava-s are no longer your husbands.[161]

Karna was talking inconsistently: his purpose, however, was to heap upon Draupadi one insult after another. Finally he said to her:

Choose for yourself another husband; so that, in some future game of dice, you may not have to become a slave again. Actually, to satisfy all the wishes of her husband is nothing derogatory for women like you. Maybe, being a slave suits you the best; for a woman slave is known to act as she wishes.[162]

Was this Karna's revenge for Draupadi grievous insult at her *svayam-vara* that he never forgot?[163]

More seriously, he said something on Duhshasana's conduct towards her:

Karna (to Vikarna)

If this be your view that Draupadi, clad in one garment, has been brought into this Assembly against all decency, then you listen to this.

The gods have legislated for a woman one husband only (monogamy); but this Draupadi is under the control of several men, and is therefore decidedly a whore.[164]

Her being brought to this Assembly is nothing strange. In one garment, or without any, she *could* be brought to this Assembly. This is my opinion.[165]

Now he addressed Duhshasana:

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160. Ibid., 71.2.
161. Ibid., 71.4.
162. Ibid., 71.3.
163. See again p.141 above.
164. *Vana-parva*, 68.35.
165. Ibid., 68.36.

Duhshasana! Pay no heed to what this fool Vikarna says. Take away the clothes of Pandava-s and of Draupadi.[166]

Hearing this, the Pandava-s removed their upper garments themselves. And, in that open and full Assembly, Duhshasana proceeded to disrobe Draupadi. Thereupon, distressed to the limit of her endurance, she desperately thought of Krishna, and a miracle happened. In the place of whatever part of her one-garment Duhshasna would remove, a new garment would appear. In fact, Draupadi was now being fully draped by invisible divine hands. Duhshasana would remove the new garment, only to find it replaced with another in that very moment.[167] Utterly exhausted, Duhshasana fell, in the very pile of garments he had tried to remove from Draupadi's person.

Simultaneously, Bhima was reacting strongly, if only emotionally but was prevented from doing what he wanted to do. He was in a strange situation, reacting not only against the tormentors of his wife Draupadi but also against his elder brother Yudhishthira, both at the same time and openly.

Bhima (to Yudhishthira)

In the homes of gamblers, unchaste women are sometimes seen: but those gamblers do not ever gamble, with their wives as stake. Even towards those unchaste women, they have feelings of kindness.[168]

You put at the stake all our immense wealth, and thereafter us, your brothers, and lost, making us slaves. Even that did not make me angry; for you are the master of all that we are. But you gambled again, with Draupadi as the stake, which was absolutely wrong. It is because of you that these low and cruel men are inflicting upon her all this pain. Having us as her husbands, she was not to be insulted like this.[169]

For Draupadi's pitiable condition, I direct my anger at *you*. I will burn both your arms. Sahadeva, bring some fire.[170]

166. Ibid., 68.38.
167. Ibid., 68.41–48.
168. Ibid., 68.1.
169. Ibid., 68.2–5.
170. Ibid., 68.6.

Arjuna dissuaded Bhima from taking that step; for it would only have delighted their enemies. But, addressing the kings in the Assembly, Bhima took two vows: that he would in the war kill Duhshasana and drink his blood as his just punishment for his unpardonable ignoble conduct towards Draupadi;[171] and that he would break Duryodhana's thighs which he had exposed while making an obscene gesture to Draupadi.[172] The whole assembly applauded Bhima's resolves.[173] Thirteen years later, during the war between the Pandava-s and the Kaurava-s, Bhima fulfilled in full measure these two vows.

Meanwhile, Vidura had challenged both the Assembly and King Dhritarashtra that the way Draupadi was being treated was in violation of every norm of decent conduct, against every tenet of the *dharma* of a kshattriya, a disgrace Duryodhana had brought upon the Kuru-family, and he warned of its ill consequences. Realising that his son and his associates had transgressed all limits, King Dhritarashtra asked Draupadi to state any wish she might have. She asked the King, her step father-in-law, to release Yudhishthira from the slavery he had got into. That was granted. Yudhishthira was liberated. On the King asking her to feel free to state a second wish, Draupadi asked that Bhima, Arjuna, Nakula and Sahadeva be freed likewise from their bondage. That was granted, too. They all were free now. On the King asking her to state yet another wish, Draupadi said: 'One should not be greedy. What you have granted is sufficient. They will now do the rest.'[174]

Karna then spoke of Draupadi most admiringly:

> Of all the names of beautiful women I have heard, I have never heard of anyone achieving such a remarkable thing.

The sons of Kunti (Pandava-s) and the sons of Dhritarashtra (Kaurava-s) were full of anger for each other; at such a time, it was Draupadi, Krishnā, who brought peace.

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171. Ibid., 68.52–53.
172. Ibid., 71.10–14.
173. Ibid., 68.54.
174. Ibid., 71.34–36.

Panchali proved to be the saving boat to the Pandava-s at a time they were sinking.[175]

On hearing what Karna had said, Bhima whispered to himself: 'What a shame! It was a *woman* who saved the Pandava-s!'[176] Bhima's male ego was hurt by what Draupadi had achieved by the power of her moral fire.

What did Yudhishthira do? On that very day he gambled again, opposite Shakuni and Duryodhana, and again lost. This time it meant a thirteen-year exile to the one who lost the game. Briefly narrated here, it happened in the following way.

Freeing the Pandava-s from bondage, Dhritarashtra also restored to Yudhishthira all the wealth he had lost in gambling, and asked him to return to Indraprastha happily, giving him at the same time some sage advice not to hold in his heart rancour and bitterness for what happened. All this was wholly unacceptable, indeed unbearable, to Duhshasana and Duryodhana. Duhshasana said to his elder brother: 'this old man, our father, has given away to our enemies what we got with such difficulty.'[177] After much consultation with Karna and Shakuni as what to do next in order to destroy the Pandava-s, Duryodhana approached his father. He first narrated to him what amounted to a full biography of Arjuna's invincible valour;[178] then painted a grim picture of his obsessive fear of Arjuna;[179] and suggested that since he could not permanently live in a paranoid fear, and it would be impossible to vanquish Arjuna in a battle, a different way had to be found to destroy him, lest he proved to be a great threat to the Kaurava-s, especially after the insult and humiliation inflicted upon Draupadi which Arjuna would never forgive.

Dhritarashtra suggested to his son that he should now make peace with the Pandava-s. That is not what Duryodhana wanted to hear. Eventually the King agreed with his son's proposal that Yudhishthira

175. Ibid., 72.1–3.
176. Ibid., 72.4.
177. Ibid., 76.4.
178. Ibid., Vol.1, unnumbered verses, pp. 916–919.
179. Ibid., Vol.1, unnumbered verses, pp. 919–920.

be invited again to gamble, this time the stake being in the form of a condition mutually agreed on a point of honor before the game began, that whoever lost the game would go into exile for thirteen years, of which the last year would have to be lived incognito, and if found and recognised then the same period of exile would begin again. At the end of the thirteenth year, the loser's kingdom of would be restored to him.[180]

Deeply disturbed at what she heard, Queen Gandhari, Duryodhana's mother, advised her husband the King *not* to give his consent to what their son had proposed, for she saw in it a destructive future for the whole Kuru family. She said to him: 'bring your son to discipline instead, something you ought to have done much earlier.'[181] 'I cannot now restrain Duryodhana, even if that means the ruin of the whole Kuru clan', Dhritarashtra answered. 'What they want, let that happen: let the Pandava-s return, and my sons gamble with them again.'[182]

And that is what happened. Despite those closest to him, Draupadi included, urging him *not* to gamble again, Yudhishthira returned to Hastinapura, and gambled again, knowing, as he acknowledged, 'Shakuni's cunning'. The stake, as mentioned above, was stated clearly, and agreed upon. The words, in which the condition of this second game was stated by Shakuni, were, however, in one part exceedingly cunning, and that part concerned Draupadi. 'In case we win and you lose the game', he said to Yudhishthira, 'you would go into a thirteen-year exile *along with Draupadi.*'[183] In describing to King Dhritarashtra what the stake in the second game would be, Duryodhana had not said that.[184] Predictably, Yudhishthira lost the game. The Pandava-s along with Draupadi set out on their exile.

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180. Ibid., 74.17–20.
181. For the candid, indeed a hard, conversation on this subject between the parents, Gandhari and Dhritarashtra, see *Sabha parva,* ch.75.
182. Ibid., 75.11–12.
183. Ibid., 76.12.
184. Read again *Sabha-parva*, 74.17–20.

The thirteen-year period of their exile was a most authentic setting for the *Mahabharata* to develop the rationality of *kshama,* forgiveness, with its limits. It is in the voices mainly of Yudhishthira and his wife Draupadi, themselves wronged grievously, that the *Mahabharata* develops on the one hand the compelling rationality of *kshama,* (in the voice of Yudhishthira), and on the other the equally compelling rationality of limits to it (in the voice of Draupadi). Only those who have been wronged and hurt have a moral right to talk of forgiveness and also of the limits to it. It is a perfect method; a perfect device, rooted in life itself, which the *Mahabharata* follows throughout its inquiry into the human condition.

The narrations in the *Mahabharata* run on two distinct but interrelated levels: one, the particular situation, the personal; and the other, arising from it, that which is universal, going beyond the particular. In the voice of Draupadi, the *Mahabharata* is correcting the disorder that arises from a one-sided emphasis on forgiveness and reconciliation, regardless of the time, the place, and the person(s) concerned

Draupadi argued most forcefully for regaining through war what their cousins, the Kaurava-s, had dishonestly deprived them of. Resisting her arguments, Yudhishthira placed emphasis on reconciliation instead, as the foundation of life. He maintained this in response to his wife's charge that there seemed to be in his heart neither pain at their altered situation, nor anger against those who had maliciously caused it. Her build-up to what was clearly an accusation, not entirely unjust, and not her accusation alone, as we will presently see, had in it emotional fire, but intellectually it was even more skillful. The purpose of both was to rouse him to just anger and to legitimate use of force: and this, not just for her sake but for their sake most of all. In what she was saying, Draupadi was not lamenting her situation but those of the Pandava-s, recalling what they were and what they were now reduced to.

Draupadi (to Yudhishthira)

Clothed in garments mean and coarse, when we were sent off on this life of misery and deprivation, there were tears in the eyes of all excepting those four, wicked and evil, Duryodhana, Karna,

Shakuni, and Duhshasana. They had a mocking smile on their lips, and not a tear in their eyes.[185]

Seeing what we are reduced to, and its injustice, how can you *not* be angry?

A kshattriya who does not use force when time demands it, invites from everybody, contempt alone. No, not for a moment must you entertain towards our enemies this feeling of reconciliation: for this is the time for force.[186]

Yudhishthira (to Draupadi)

Draupadi! If your appeal to anger and force was accepted as just principles of conduct, what kind of world would this be? There would never be peace among men, for anger is the root of all conflicts.[187]

Here we must interrupt Yudhishthira for a moment. Draupadi was *not* advocating anger and force as 'just principles of conduct'. Yudhishthira was not listening to what she was *saying*. She was saying, *in the given context*, and that should be kept in mind throughout, that 'a kshattriya who does not use force *when time demands it*, invites from everybody contempt alone.'

Now let us hear the rest of Yudhishthira's advocacy of forgiveness and reconciliation—on principle.

If there were not men willing to forgive, and to subdue their anger, there would be no peace among men; for anger is the origin of all discord.[188]

If everybody is angry, then anger is returned with anger. Hurt, he hurts: violated, he violates. Fathers would kill sons, and sons would kill fathers: husbands would kill wives, and wives would kill husbands.[189]

In a world where there is only anger, Krishne, there can be no peace. For you must know, dear one, that reconciliation is the root of peace among people.[190]

185. Ibid., 27.7–9.
186. Ibid., 27.26–39.
187. Ibid., 29.1; also 29.30.
188. Ibid., 29.25.
189. Ibid., 29.27–8.
190. Ibid., 29.29.

It is forgiveness that keeps the world together.[191]
The opposite of forgiveness is anger and intolerance. And anger, uncontrolled, destroys men.[192]

That anger destroys human beings, this can be observed.[193]

It brings destruction all around because a man in anger does not know what should be said and what should not be said. To him, there is then nothing that must not be done, nor anything that must not be said.[194]

Driven by anger, a man can commit any offence: can kill the respected elders: by his offensive speech, insult men who are noble: or can kill even himself.[195] That is because he is not able to see a thing in its proper light and is unable to see the limits.[196]

Answering a question often asked everywhere, '*Why* forgiveness? Why *not* revenge?' the *Mahabharata* says in the voice of Yudhishthira:

In that case, people will return aggression with aggression, hurt with hurt, violence with violence.[197]

In this way there will be no peace anywhere: and peace is based on reconciliation.[198]

Therefore, a man who is wise controls his anger at all times and is ready to forgive the transgressions of others.[199]
In this world, reconciliation is the best.[200]

For, just as a man attacks another, that man attacks him in turn at the opportune moment.[201]

Draupadi had never disputed any of this. Neither had she ever advocated anger and force as decisive factors in relationships *always*. She was a woman of intelligence that was as luminous as her beauty. She had moments earlier argued that to separate the principle of

191. Ibid., 29.40.
192. Ibid, 29.3–5.
193. Ibid, 29.6.
194. Ibid, 29.8.
195. Ibid, 29.7, 9, 22.
196. Ibid, 29.21.
197. Ibid, 29.30.
198. Ibid, 29.32.
199. Ibid, 29.10–1, 16–7, 19–20, 36–7.
200. Ibid, 29.47.
201. *Anushasana-parva*, 113.10.

reconciliation, or forgiveness, from *desha* and *kala*, 'the given time' and 'the given place', and from *patra*, the character of the person(s) concerned, and then place upon it an absolute value, as Yudhishthira tended to do, is to invite disrespect, not peace. She gave numerous examples of it from daily life.

> The man who is gentle is disregarded by everybody; and the man who is harsh keeps hurting people. Who knows the occasion to be one or the other, is truly a great king.[202]

Without disputing that forgiveness is a good quality, indeed a virtue, and reconciliation may be the best, Draupadi argued that it would be a great mistake to think that they are so *always*.[203] Neither force nor reconciliation is good *always:*

> He who is always forgiving invites several defects. Because forgiveness is seen as weakness, and weakness invites disrespect, his relatives, his subordinates, his enemies, and even those who are neutral to him, do not behave towards him with respect; nor does anybody ever show him courtesy. Therefore, to forgive always, is unwise even for the wise.[204] Another's capacity to hurt and to harm makes people afraid; and what one is afraid of, one does not take lightly. The king who can do neither good nor harm is of little worth.

In the voice of Draupadi, the *Mahabharata* teaches:

> To be forgiving *always* is unwise even for the wise. But the man who uses force *always,* and never forgives, also invites many wrong things.[205] Without regard to place and occasion, full of anger and force, he keeps punishing people. He alienates friends and becomes an object of hatred on the part of his own people: because he insults others, he suffers losses, and in turn is treated with reproach and disrespect: he generates all around anguish, hostility and agitation, and in the process loses everything, often his life.[206]

Draupadi was suggesting to her learned husband Yudhishthira that for these reasons life plainly required that 'one should neither be

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202. *Vana-parva*, 28.36.
203. Ibid., 28.1–38.
204. Ibid, 28.7–8.
205. Ibid, 28.17.
206. Ibid, 28.18–23.

always gentle nor always forceful: rather, with regard to given contexts, *desha*, *kala* and *patra*, one should be now gentle and then forceful.[207] There is a time for forgiveness; and there is a time for force.[208]

The principle to be relied upon in these matters was this, Draupadi said:

> Whereas truly nothing is difficult with gentleness, and gentleness can conquer harshness, whether force should be applied or reconciliation, must depend on a rational grasp of *desha* and *kala*; 'given time' and 'given place', of one's own relative strength and weakness; and of the nature of the given situation and its cause.[209] Gentleness achieves nothing if practised in a wrong place and at a wrong time and to a wrong person.[210]
>
> If he is always gentle, the people ignore him: if he uses force always, they become agitated. He should be gentle when it is time for gentleness, and be forceful when it is time for force.[211]

Lest it was thought that these were the self-serving arguments of a woman who, deeply hurt, was vindictively seeking revenge, and cleverly inciting her husbands, the *Mahabharata* expresses in the voice of Bhishma, almost in the same words as those of Draupadi, the same rationality concerning the limits to forgiveness:

> In the same way as the autumn sun gives neither too great heat nor is too cold, the king should be neither too gentle nor too forceful.[212]
>
> You should not be forgiving always and everywhere. For, in being like a gentle elephant, such a king creates conditions only of *adharma*.[213]
>
> A gentle and forgiving king is ignored; the one who is severe and harsh always, hurts and agitates people. Therefore, according to the circumstances, take recourse to gentleness and firmness.[214]

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207. Ibid, 28.24–5.
208. Ibid, 28.26–31.
209. Ibid, 28.32–4, 35, 38.
210. Ibid, 28.34.
211. Ibid, 140.65.
212. Ibid, 56.40.
213. Ibid, 56.37.
214. Ibid, 56.21.

Yudhishthira was willing to learn from Bhishma but not from Draupadi. She was, after all, only a wife, just a woman! As the text indicates throughout, without expressly saying so, not only was he hardly ever attentive to her *feelings* behind the spoken words, he was hardly ever attentive even to what she was actually *saying*.

In what follows, the *Mahabharata* not only showed Yudhishthira's dismissive attitude towards what Draupadi was saying; but also put forth in her voice much else of great significance which was not merely personal—a serious doubt on the belief that *Dharma protected, protects;* for good reasons questioning whether there was justice in God's creation and whether He was truly merciful; and strongly advocating *purushartha*, 'manly endeavour', 'strenuous effort', in the philosophical debate on the question of causality: *Purushartha*, 'effort, or Fate, *daiva*'? And she was thoroughly familiar with the various arguments in that debate.

At the very beginning of their long years of exile, in a conversation between Yudhishthira and Draupadi, pertaining to their unhappy situation, her other four husbands listening, she first expressed on evidently good grounds a doubt on the efficacy of *dharma*.[215] Draupadi said (here briefly):

> You and your brothers have never ever considered anything of greater value than *dharma*. Your life has been for *dharma*; your rule, your governance, your kingdom has been in accordance with *dharma*; and everybody knows it.[216]
>
> You have never shown disrespect to those equal to you in status or to those lower than you. Even after gaining a vast empire, you never entertained the arrogance that comes with power.
>
> Your devotion to *dharma* has been so steadfast that I often think you can renounce your brothers Bhima, Arjuna, Nakula and Sahadeva, and even me, but not abandon *dharma*.[217]
>
> I have heard the cultured and the cultivated say that *if dharma is protected, dharma protects*. But it seems to me that *dharma* is not protecting *you*.[218]

215. *Vana-parva,* 30.5–20.
216. Ibid., 30.5–6.
217. Ibid., 30.7.
218. Ibid., 30.8.

When I think of this, I get confused, and feel exceedingly sad.

On equally good grounds, she next questioned whether there was justice in God's creation and whether He was truly merciful. Draupadi said (here briefly):

I have heard an ancient belief expressed that all beings are under the control of God; nobody is free.

It is God who determines for every being, according to his and her *karma*, pleasure and pain, the pleasant and the unpleasant.

Just as a puppet is manipulated by the puppet-player, and all its actions are done according to his will, so is man manipulated by God.

Suffused in all beings like space, it is God who determines for all beings their pleasure and pain.

Man is not self-determined, he is not free. Like a bird tied to a cord, he is governed by God; having control neither over the self nor over any other.[219]

Just as small pieces of straw keep getting scattered in strong wind, so do human beings, under the control of God, keep coming and going. Some are engaged in noble deeds, some in deeds that are ignoble: but God, immanent in all, is not visible.

The human body is the field, a mere instrument of God, through which, He wills, He makes human beings do acts that are good and also acts that are not good.

See, such is the range of God's *maya* that first He has that *maya* confuse and delude human beings, and then He gets human beings killed by human beings.[220]

Just as human beings cut wood, stone, and iron by using lifeless pieces of wood, stone, and iron; so does God, the Creator of all beings, use created beings to destroy created beings.[221]

God plays with human beings as a child plays with toys, and keeps separating them and then uniting them.

I am of the view that God does not act towards us human beings like father and mother: rather He acts, as most human beings do, as if he were angry and vengeful.

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219. Ibid., 30.21–25.
220. Ibid., 30.29–32.
221. Ibid., 30.35–36.

> The evident fact, seen everywhere, that those who are good struggle even for a livelihood and the wicked prosper, only strengthens this view of mine; and on seeing that, I get the more disturbed and restless.[222]
>
> If karma follows only its doer, and does not pass to another, then it surely must involve God as well, He being immanent in all beings. If, on the contrary, the fruit of one's ignoble karma does not touch God as well, then it must be because He is powerful and man is weak. And I sorrow for man who is weak.[223]

Until now Draupadi was on the objective ground of a familiar philosophical doubt; which was, however, also a feeling and not just some remote academic argument; for what she was saying touched human life intimately. Continuing her address to Yudhishthira, she now came to the more personal:

> When I see your distress and Duryodhana's prosperity, I do criticise that Providence that does not seem to distinguish between the good and the wicked.[224]

Before we hear Yudhishthira's response to Draupadi's skepticism concerning the truth of the belief that *Dharma protected, protects* and whether there was justice and mercy in God's creation, it must first be noted that he began by addressing her formally, and coldly, as 'Yajnaseni' (daughter of Yajnasena), 'Princess' (*rajaputri)*, or at best, but still remotely, 'Kalyani'; only towards the end did he address her, once, as 'Krishne'. There was in his voice no indication either of love or of concern; although in everything that Draupadi had said to him there were both, for him and for his brothers. It was as if she were contending with *Dharma* and with God on *their* behalf, on behalf of the virtuous and noble Pandava-s fraudulently reduced to the situation they were in, asking: why *they*? Yudhishthira seemed to have missed all that, and said:

Yudhishthira (to Draupadi)

Yajnaseni! What you said was said very elegantly, in a way most

222. Ibid., 30.39.
223. Ibid., 30.42–43.
224. Ibid., 30.40.

interesting, and I listened to you carefully. But, out of your ignorance, you are now advocating atheism.[225]

Thereafter, he proceeded to answer Draupadi's skepticism not philosophically but with outright condemnation; in contrast to the philosophical method of the *Mahabharata*'s inquiry in the human condition, in which everything was open to questioning, the concept of *dharma* and the existence of God most of all:

> Whoever, advocating atheism wickedly, casts doubt on the efficacy of *dharma*, and judges it by 'milking' it for selfish results, will ever be deprived of the true fruit of *dharma*.[226]
>
> Whoever doubts *dharma* and, weak and irresolute, distrusts the Veda, is forever deprived of the greatest of all blessings.[227]
>
> The person of low intelligence, transgressing the tenets of *shastra*-s, doubts *dharma*, is more sinful than a thief and a *shudra*.[228]
>
> For a person who denigrates *dharma*, there is neither atonement nor redemption, only hell.[229]

Some more abusive statements in that tone followed along with much pontification on how *dharma* could eventually never be without results. Finally, Yudhishthira sternly said to Draupadi:

> *Therefore*, you must not foolishly cast doubts on God and on *dharma*.[230]
>
> Give up your atheistic views. Do not denigrate God who sustains and preserves all created beings.[231]

Yudhishthira would undoubtedly have known the commonplace that, without inviting the accusation of propounding atheism, even the most devout had at sometime or the other in their lives, questioned whether there was justice and mercy in God's creation. But let Draupadi answer him.

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225. Ibid., 31.1.
226. Ibid., 31.6.
227. Ibid., 31.8.
228. Ibid., 31.10.
229. Ibid., 31.18.
230. Ibid., 31.15; also 31.23, 40–42.
231. Ibid., 31.40–41.

Draupadi (to Yudhishthira)

In no way shall I ever denigrate *dharma*, much less denigrate God the Preserver of all created beings.

Consider what I said, to be a desperate cry of a deeply unhappy woman. I will cry even more. And with calm mind listen to what I say.[232]

Draupadi them mounted a clear, consistent, and powerful argument for *purushartha*, human effort, as the means of gaining everything of worth.[233] She engaged in an issue that has been as central to human life as it was central to the *Mahabharata*—the question of causality: 'Is a person free to be what he, or she, is? Or is man determined by some other: Time, or Fate, or God, or History?' The substance of what she said was:

At this moment we are in great adversity. Without arguing endlessly the question of human freedom, or whether you will or will not achieve success, should you devote yourself to manly effort and have no doubts as to its efficacy, we could regain what you have lost.[234]

Taking into consideration the given time and the given place, and by judging through intelligence one's capacities and strength, let a man, with untroubled mind, make effort and increase in blessings.[235]

We owe it to Draupadi to say here that she did not, however, turn the theory of *purushartha*, 'manly effort', into some absolute and unquestionable theory. She was aware of the various opposite arguments, *and stated them as well.*[236]

Hearing the long conversation between Draupadi and Yudhishthira, and already 'resentful and angry'[237] at his attitude, Bhimasena, his next younger brother, stepped into that conversation, and spoke to him some plain hard words.

232. Ibid., 32.1–2.
233. Ibid, 32.1–60.
234. Ibid., 32.44.
235. Ibid., 32.53.
236. Ibid., 32.32–38.
237. Ibid., 33.1.

In the first place, he held him (Yudhishthira) wholly accountable for the situation they were in.[238]

He then spoke of 'how unworthy of a kshattriya was the kind of life they were now living, like the deer of the forest, unworthy of the strong.'[239] Giving his reasoning, he strongly urged Yudhishthira that they should recover by force, by recourse to war straightaway, what they had been fraudulently deprived of.

But, far more importantly, Bhima plainly spoke of what was coming in the way, though: Yudhishthira's unquestioning dedication to *dharma* which expressed itself, among other things, in his unquestioning emphasis on forgiveness as a sound basis of human relationships, always and at all places. 'We keep forgiving the repeated offences of our enemies', Bhima said; 'the visible result is that, even though we are invincibly strong in every way, the sons of Dhritarashtra have concluded that we are weak, and can be trampled upon. That is now our greatest pain, not if we were to die on the battlefield.'[240]

While the *Mahabharata* corrects, in the voice of Draupadi, the disorder that arises from a one-sided emphasis on forgiveness and reconciliation, regardless of the time, the place, and the person(s) concerned; in the voice of Bhima, it corrects the disorder that arises from a one-sided occupation with *dharma,* fragmenting it from the other attributes of life. In that, Draupadi and Bhima are addressing not just Yudhishthira but all of mankind. But their concern was equally with the particular which was, however, better understood in the light of what is universally true, here expressed in their voices:

Bhima (to Yudhishthira)

> You are devoted to *dharma*; and that is what you are famous for. In order that *you* may indulge and fulfill your life's loved aim, *dharma,* we have put ourselves in this great adversity.[241]
>
> The *dharma* that brings only distress to oneself and to one's friends is no *dharma* but its opposite, *kudharma.*[242]

238. Ibid., 33.6–10, 83.
239. Ibid., 33,11.
240. Ibid., 33.16.
241. Ibid., 33.8.
242. Ibid., 33.21.

> In the same way as neither pleasure nor pain can affect the one dead, the one who is dedicated to *dharma* alone, and has become weak by its observance always and in all circumstances, is given up both by *dharma* and by *artha* (material prosperity).[243]
>
> No king has ever gained kingdom and universal authority by immersing himself in *dharma* only.[244]
>
> Just as a blind person cannot see the effulgence of the sun, the one who limits *dharma* to *dharma* (and does not relate it with the other attributes of life) is a person of little understanding, only courting pain in the name of *dharma* without knowing what *dharma* truly means.[245]

Bhima expanded on this further and related *dharma*, the ordering of life and relationships, with *artha*, material prosperity, and with sexual *kama*, fulfillment, the other natural attributes of life: at the same time warning against a one-sided emphasis either on material prosperity or on the pursuit of pleasure, which invites disorder no less.[246] Bhima had come to advocating this rationality of the unity of human attributes after delivering, which he alone could, a frank and honest question for Yudhishthira to consider:

> Could it not be that reciting endlessly *this is dharma, this is dharma*, and enervated thereby, you have become impotent?[247]

Furthermore, he asked Yudhishthira to consider whether all his talk of forgiveness and of other ethical principles might not just be a high-sounding alibi for his weakness of character. It is significant that, in its honest inquiry into the human condition, the *Mahabharata* raises that distinct possibility as a part of human character. Bhima knew that he and Draupadi alone, and not others, could do some candid talking with Yudhishthira:

Bhima (to Yudhishthira)

> Arjuna, the greatest of all archers and warriors, is bearing in silence this dreadful life in exile in a forest, but, controlling his resentment and anger, says nothing to you.[248]

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243. Ibid., 33.22.
244. Ibid., 33.58.
245. Ibid., 33.23.
246. Ibid., 33.24–40; also 33.42–44; and 33.47–48.
247. Ibid., 33.13. The Sanskrit word used is *kleeba*, meaning 'impotent'.
248. Ibid., 35.12–13.

Nakula, Sahadeva, and our mother Kunti also, keep silent like the deaf and the dumb, if only to indulge and please you.[249]

So do all your friends, just to please you. *Only the two of us—I and Prativindhya's mother (Draupadi)—feel especially distressed.*[250] King! What distress can be greater than this, that those ignoble and weak enemies of ours, having wrenched the empire of the strong like us, are enjoying it?[251]

Because of the defects of character that come from your kindly disposition, you (and, along with you, we) are suffering this adversity; but, King, nobody applauds you for this.[252]

By hearing and repeating the words of the Veda in their literal sense only, and missing their meaning, your intelligence is dulled, and you can no longer understand, much less convey, the true substance of reality, *tatvartha*.[253]

For a while Yudhishthira reflected on what Bhima said; whereas he had paused not even for a moment to consider that there might be truth in what Draupadi had said to him. Moreover, the tone of his response to Bhima was in sharp contrast to the tone of his response to Draupadi.

Yudhishthira (to Bhima)

That you should be causing me pain with the sharp arrows of your words, is undoubtedly right. Although what you said was against me, I do not blame you. It is because of *my* conduct that this adversity has come upon all of you.[254]

Yudhishthira then began recounting what happened at that infamous game of dice, at which he kept putting at stake whatever he had, including Draupadi, and kept losing because the dice was fraudulently loaded by Shakuni, that trickster, and the events thereafter.[255] Bhima remembered every detail of it, and there was no need for Yudhishthira to recall it at all. In doing so, his purpose

249. Ibid., 35.14.
250. Ibid., 35.15. Prativindhya was Draupadi's son from Yudhishthira.
251. Ibid., 35.17.
252. Ibid., 35.18.
253. Ibid., 35.19.
254. Ibid., 34.2.
255. Ibid., 34.3–12.

clearly was to exonerate his self by saying that 'honest and straightforward, he was not deceitful as Shakuni was'; and 'what happened, was destined to happen.'[256]

> It pains me deeply, Bhima, that Draupadi was being insulted and humiliated by our enemies in our presence; yet we condoned it. On recalling it, I feel now the same pain as one would after drinking poison.[257]

He reminded Bhima how at the last throw in the game, which also he lost, he had agreed to what Duryodhana had proposed, that whoever lost that last throw would voluntarily go into a known exile for twelve years and another one year of exile incognito during which, if discovered, the earlier cycle of exile would start afresh. Having then agreed to that condition, it was now a matter of honour not to break it.[258] Yudhishthira was invoking a matter of principle. But he invoked also prudence: with all the greats of the realm on the side of the Kaurava-s, for whatever reason, it would be impossible to win a war against them if begun now.

* * *

There was a stream of visitors to the Pandava-s in the first twelve years of their thirteen-year exile, the last year being incognito.

Soon after they began their exile, Krishna was the very first visitor to the Pandava-s. Greatly reassured, they discussed with him their altered situation, and he blamed his absence for those earlier events. Draupadi engaged Krishna's attention the most when she said: 'because I love you, it is to you that I shall speak of my sorrow.'[259] What she had in mind, she expressed clearly.

She recounted how Duhshasana had tried to disrobe her in the royal assembly into which she was brought, dragged by her hair. Ever since, her inner space was wholly occupied by the memory of that event. But she recounted also how she was horrified even more by the silence of her five-Pandava husbands. She said to Krishna:

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256. Ibid., 34.4 and 34.6.
257. Ibid., 34.18.
258. Ibid., 34.8–12; 34.19.
259. Ibid, 12.60.

It is an established *dharma* that even a weak husband protects his wife. The wife protected, one's children are protected; and the children protected, one is protected oneself. But, seeing me being treated in a way that was beastly, my husbands didn't protect me, while Karna was laughing at that cruel spectacle, and Duryodhana had made an obscene gesture. Why, why did the Pandava-s, none possessed of greater strength than they, disregard my suffering?[260]

She began to cry bitterly:[261]

For me, there is neither husband, nor son, nor friend, nor brother, nor father. Not even *you*, Madhusudana (Krishna)![262]

All of you make light of the insult I suffered at the hands of those low men, as if it did not hurt you. The pain caused to me by Karna's mocking laughter never leaves me.[263]

Keshava! There are four reasons why *you* should always protect me: you are a relative; being born from the fires of a *yajna*, I am sacred; I am your true friend; and fourthly you are capable of protecting me.[264]

Krishna spoke to Draupadi thus:

Do not despair! For the good of the Pandava-s, I shall do everything that is possible.

Krishne! I promise you, you shall be Queen again. The sky may collapse, the Himalayas and the earth may break into pieces, the ocean may dry up, but what I have promised you, will not be in vain.[265]

Hearing Krishna speak thus, Draupadi looked at Arjuna with a somewhat challenging look; and Arjuna said to her:

Do not cry! What Madhusudana has said, shall happen.[266]

Then Draupadi's brother, Dhrishtadyumna, who also happened to be visiting them with Krishna, spoke:

Sister! I will kill Drona; Shikhandi will kill Bhishma; Bhima will kill

260. Ibid, 12.61–69.
261. Ibid., 12.122–124.
262. Ibid, 12.125.
263. *Vana-parva,* 12.126.
264. Ibid., 12.127.
265. Ibid., 12.129–131.
266. Ibid., 12.132–133.

> Duryodhana; and Arjuna will kill Karna. With Shri Krishna and Balarama on our side, we are invincible. Not even Indra could defeat us on the battlefield, what to speak of the sons of Dhritarashtra?[267]

As these words were being spoken, a dreadful violent future was already present there, as Vyasa had predicted after Krishna's killing of Shishupala at that *rajasuya-yajna.*

Life in the forest was by no means easy. But, excepting Arjuna's long absences, they were all together; and while Yudhishthira was engaging the visiting sages in profound conversations, on the part of Bhima, there were acts of loving indulgence to Draupadi as a wife and as a woman.

A strong breeze once brought to her lap a thousand-petal lotus flower, called *saugandhika*, with exquisite fragrance. She was so enchanted by it that she called out to him:

> Bhima! Look! What an exquisite flower! I want lots and lots of them. If you love me, please get me many such flowers. I will carry them to our hermitage. This one I will offer to Yudhishthira.[268]

Draupadi was a woman of the earth; and *if you love me* has always been, indeed is, a familiar earthy preamble to a request by a woman for something fervently wished. Just to indulge his beloved wife's wish, Bhima happily set out to bring her many *saugandhika* flowers. He did. But in doing so, he very nearly lost his life. That was because he had stepped into another's estate, out of bounds, in which there was a lake with hundreds of those *saugandhika* flowers, and there was a terrible fight with the guards of the estate when he was found encroaching and, the more serious, had insisted on taking those flowers by force. Draupadi knew nothing about it; and when Bhima was late in coming, greatly anxious about his safety they all set out in search of him, and found him—with lots and lots of *saugandhika* flowers for Draupadi.

Once, there was another visitor. When the Pandava-s had gone out on some errand and Draupadi was alone, King Jayadratha, the

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267. Ibid., 12.134–135.
268. *Vana-parva*, 146.5–7.

King of Sindhu, arrived.[269] He saw her from a distance, standing in a doorway of her cottage, and was captivated instantly by her great beauty. He wondered who she could be: a celestial nymph, a girl from the family of gods, or some enticing delusion, *maya*, created by gods?[270] Smitten by her, at first he sent a messenger, Kotikasya by name, to find out whose wife she was, or whether she was human at all, and then himself arrived at the cottage. A visitor, furthermore a relative by marriage, he was received with courtesy, which he quickly abused. He said to Draupadi:

> Now look, your husbands are done in, finished, and being an intelligent woman you should now consider your own interest. Intelligent women do not care for husbands who are left with no money. Why should you then suffer? Leave them. I will make you my chief queen, and you shall rule over my kingdom. Leave these husbands of yours, and come with me, now. Be my wife.[271]

Draupadi (to Jayadratha)

> How did you have the courage to talk to me like this? I received you with courtesy because you are the husband of Duhshala, the only sister of the Kuru-s and thus of the Pandava-s as well. You are in that sense a brother to me. Although born in a good family, you do not know what decent conduct is. You have grossly abused the hospitality shown to you. Now go, this moment.[272]

Jayadratha (to Draupadi)

> You do not know the nature of kings. It is well known that women and jewels are the common property of all.[273]
>
> Either you come with me willingly or I shall take you away by force.[274]

Saying this, he lifted the struggling Draupadi, put her in his chariot, and drove away at great speed. When the Pandava-s returned, and

269. *Vana-parva*, Chs. 264–272.
270. Ibid., 264.10.
271. Ibid., 267.13–17.
272. Ibid., 267.21; 268.1–11.
273. Ibid., Vol. 2, the unnumbered verse, p. 1695.
274. Ibid., 268.12.

the maid told them what had happened, they gave Jayadratha chase; caught up with him; overpowered him; but, on the intervention of Yudhishthira, spared his life, although Bhima was about to kill him with no mercy shown. Only his head was completely shaved, with five small tufts of hair left upon it as a visible mark of his declared servitude to the Pandava-s for life.[275] Bound, and full of wounds, he was produced before Draupadi, who said: 'Let him go.'

On another occasion, some other visitors created for Draupadi many moments of immense anxiety. Durvasa the ascetic, notorious for his bad temper and ungracious conduct, arrived with many of his ascetic followers, announcing that they all were hungry and wanted to be fed.[276] They were maliciously directed there by Duryodhana, knowing that the exiled Pandava-s were poor and would be unable to feed such a large number of brahmana-s, arriving moreover without notice, and would thereby incur Durvasa's curse, adding to their existing miseries. Demanding to be fed, Durvasa and his ascetics announced that they were going for a bath in the nearby river and would be back soon. Draupadi felt exceedingly troubled; for, after she had eaten, nothing was left in the household to feed the unexpected, and so many, brahmana guests.

Not knowing what to do, she did the only thing she could do: she thought of Lord Krishna, her friend, who had been her saviour many a time, and thought of him in most moving lyrical words.[277]

Sensing Draupadi was in trouble, Krishna miraculously arrived, only to say as soon as he arrived: 'Krishne! I am desperately hungry. First give me something to eat, and then tell me what is troubling you.'

Embarrassed even more, nearly mortified, Draupadi said: 'I have eaten for today; and there is nothing is left in the cooking pot.'

Thereupon Krishna said to her: 'Krishne! This is no time for indulging in humour. I am desperately hungry. Go and get that cooking pot.' On his insistence, she did.

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275. Ibid., 272.9–12.
276. For this story, see *Vana-parva,* Chs. 262–263.
277. Ibid., 263.8–14.

Krishna found one leaf of cooked vegetable left on the mouth of Draupadi's cooking pot. He ate it with great relish, saying thereafter: 'May Sri Hari, the Provider of the Universe, be pleased and contented with this one leaf of cooked vegetable.' At that very moment, a miracle happened on the river bank. Durvasa and his ascetic brahmana-s began feeling as if they had eaten so fully that they could eat not a morsel more. Fearful that, after ordering for food at such short notice at the Pandava household, and putting Draupadi to anxiety and trouble on that account, if they did not return to eat, it would be a great offence, and the just wrath of the good and the great Pandava-s could destroy them all, they decided it would be wiser to vanish without a word, and ran away in different directions.

In describing the visit of Satyabhama, a wife of Sri Krishna, the *Mahabharata* allows us a rare reprieve from the flames of Draupadi's life.[278] Since they were seeing each other after a long time, Satyabhama drew Draupadi aside for a womanly conversation, and asked her: 'how do you keep your husbands under your control, so that they do your bidding, do not ever get angry with you, and keep looking at your face most of the time? Is it by using some *mantra*, or some special knowledge and skill, *tantra*, or a special sacred bath, or medicine, or is it by using some special herb or root? Panchali! Tell me the secret, so that I may also use it in keeping Krishna under my control always.[279]

Draupadi (to Satyabhama)

> What you are asking me are the ways of unchaste and wicked women. Why should we talk about the path those kinds of women tread?
>
> To ask such a question, which implies distrust of one's husband, is not worthy of you, Krishna's dearest wife, and an intelligent woman besides.[280]

Draupadi followed this by educating Satyabhama on how a wife can endanger her husband's health and sometime even life by using

278. See *Vana-parva*, Chs 233–234.
279. Ibid., 233.1–8.
280. Ibid., 233.10–11.

medicines or herbs and roots placed in her hands by unscrupulous men. She counselled Satyabhama:

> 'A virtuous wife should never bring harm to her husband by using *mantra* and *tantra* to keep him under her control. If the husband comes to know that his wife is using upon him some *mantra* or *tantra* or some medicine, he would become as agitated and distrustful as the man suspecting a snake in his house.[281]

Draupadi proceeded to give a long discourse on the conduct of a virtuous and devoted wife, talking of herself in relation to her husbands as an example. Satyabhama heard with patience all that familiar stuff, and then said, 'respectfully', but (one can imagine) also laughing inwardly:

> Yajnaseni! I did not mean to offend you by asking what I asked you. Women friends do sometimes engage in light-hearted talk, full of mirth.[282]

* * *

The thirteenth year of their exile was no less challenging and trying for Draupadi than it was for the Pandava-s, for it had to be lived incognito. If they were discovered, they would have to begin their entire thirteen-year exile afresh. That was one of the conditions with which that game of dice at was played Hastinapura. Lusting to gamble at any cost, and justifying it, Yudhishthira had agreed to that condition as well, which had astonished Bhima even at that time. In his hard talk with him later, mentioned in these pages earlier,[283] he had said to Yudhishthira furthermore:

> Your keeping us hidden during the incognito-period of our exile will be like covering the Himalayas with a handful of straw.
>
> Known everywhere, shining like the sun, how will you keep yourself unrecognised, hidden?
>
> Most people know me also. It will not be possible for me to remain incognito, just as it is not possible to cover the Meru Mountain.

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281. Ibid., 233.12–17.
282. Ibid., 233.60–61.
283. See pp. 193–195 above.

After pointing to the impossibility of keeping particularly Arjuna hidden, but also Nakula and Sahadeva, he had said:

> And how will Draupadi, known everywhere, keep *herself* hidden? Moreover, many of those kings we have vanquished would now have combined with Duryodhana and, to please him, would certainly employ spies to discover where we are, in which case it will be a great disaster for us.[284]

Now, at the beginning of the thirteenth year, they all were discussing how best to get through that year, hidden, unrecognised? They decided that each of them, in a disguise, would seek service and shelter in the palace of King Virata, king of the Matsya domain and known for his goodness.[285] Yudhishthira proposed that, disguised as a brahmana, with 'Kanka' as his assumed name, he would seek employment and shelter as 'the court gambler', (ironically) 'formerly in the service of King Yudhishthira.' Bhima proposed that under the assumed name of 'Paurogava' he could act as cook and supervise the royal kitchen, and amuse the Court as a wrestler, too. Arjuna said that under the assumed name of 'Brihannala', 'neither man nor woman' (under the curse of Urvashi,[286] which proved to be most beneficial at this time) he would teach the women of the royal household music and dance and other arts; would braid their hair, amusing them with interesting stories. Nakula proposed that under the assumed name of 'Granthik' he would offer his services as supervisor of the royal stable; and Sahadeva, under the assumed name of 'Tantripala', would seek work as supervisor of the royal cattle farm, cows and the rest. If asked where they worked earlier, each would say: 'in the service of King Yudhishthira.'

In a rare expression of concern for her, Yudhishthira asked what work *Draupadi* could seek?

> Daughter of King Drupada, Draupadi is our beloved wife. Her dignity is more important to us than even our own lives.
> She does not know any particular household work: what work

284. Ibid., 35.23–28.
285. *Virata-parva*, Chs.1–3.
286. See Ch. 3 in this book.

could she then seek in the royal household, and how will she live? Very delicate in her body, moreover, what work *could* she do? Ever since she was born, she has known only royal luxury, not privation and suffering.[287]

Draupadi (to Yudhishthira)

Do not worry about me. I will take care of myself. You ask me what work I could do, and how I will live? I will approach Queen Sudeshna (wife of King Virata): seeing me helpless, coming to her, she will take me in her service, keep me with her, and protect me in every way

There are women who earn their livelihood by working as maids in other households. They are called *sairandhri.* They protect themselves by the strength of their character. I will introduce myself as a *sairandhri,* especially adept at making hair and weaving them into intricate beautiful braids. On the King (or the Queen) asking me, I shall say that once I served as a maid to Queen Draupadi(!).[288]

King Virata was skeptical of the self-introduction the Pandava-s gave; and Queen Sudeshna, looking at Draupadi, was skeptical that she belonged to the *sairandhri*-class. However, as they had planned and hoped, all of them got service and shelter in the palace of King Virata. They had to be exceedingly careful, in the presence or the hearing of others, not to call each other by their names.

Sairandhri as 'a maid to Queen Draupadi' had seen much that was distressing in the life of her mistress, but could only watch helplessly; Draupadi saw some distressing happenings in the life of Sairandhri, now a maid to Queen Sudeshna, but did not watch helplessly.

Not long after Draupadi as Sairandhri began working as maid to Queen Sudeshna, she attracted the lustful attention of the Queen's elder brother, Keechaka, who was also the chief commander of the Virata-army and highly regarded by the King. First courteously and then sternly, Sairandhri repulsed Keechaka's indecent attention and proposal, at one point warning him that she was being protected by five invisible celestial beings, *gandharva*-s, who would punish him if

287. *Virata-parva,* 3.14–17.
288. Ibid., 3.18–21.

he did not behave decently towards her. He pursued her relentlessly nevertheless.[289]

He even sought his sister's, the Queen's help to obtain Sairandhri, saying that he would kill himself if he did not have her. He requested his sister to send Sairandhri to his house, on the pretext of collecting some wine, which Sudeshna did, out of sisterly love for a brother. Explaining that she was fearful of what would happen if she went, Sairandhri asked the Queen to send one of her numerous other maids instead. The Queen insisted on sending *her*; and the predictable happened: Keechaka tried to force himself on her, insulting her grievously. Sairandhri pushed him away, and he fell. She herself ran towards where King Virata was, in the Royal Assembly Hall, surrounded by the members of the Assembly, and desperately sought the King's help.

Keechaka followed her there, caught her by her hair, and kicked her. Bleeding from the mouth, Sairandhri fell on the floor of the Assembly Hall. What happened next was in many respects a replay of what had happened to Draupadi in King Dhritarashtra's Assembly Hall at Hastinapura when Duhshasana had tried to disrobe her. Sairandhri appealed to the King who, himself fearful of Keechaka's power as the chief commander of the army, prevaricated and ignored the whole incident

Yudhishthira and Bhima, who were with King Virata, had seen Keechaka pull Sairandhri by her hair, kick her, and had seen her bleed from the mouth after being kicked. At that horrible spectacle, Bhima was convulsed with anger. He would have killed Keechaka on the spot but, on a sign from Yudhishthira, restrained himself for fear of being discovered. That made Bhima unbearably sad and Draupadi felt a surge of anger (and, perhaps, contempt too). Not a fool, she was aware that, if she forced the issue, the Pandava-s might be in danger of being discovered. Yet, she felt that she had to speak, in the name of justice and decency and *dharma*, not on behalf of Sairandhri alone but on behalf of all helpless oppressed women. And she did.

Draupadi helped Sairandhri get up and, standing straight, with moral fire in her voice, her eyes burning with the same fire, challenged

289. The whole Keechaka episode is narrated in the *Virata-parva*.

on her behalf both the King and the Assembly. While Sairandhri was crying, the more because she felt helpless,

Draupadi (as Sairandhri, to King Virata)

> Walking in the path of truth and *dharma*, the king who make no distinction between his own children and the people of his domain, should always protect those depending upon him.
>
> King! You are sitting in the seat of *dharma*, the seat of impartial law and governance. Protect this helpless woman. I did no offence; yet, this low man, Keechaka, has, in your presence, kicked me as if I were his bonded slave.
>
> I appeal to you: protect me from this low evil man.[290]

Draupadi spoke, furthermore, on the function and the duties of a king (the state). She said to King Virata:

> Even on seeing that this woman, utterly helpless, has been kicked and insulted, you condone that act of this evil man. Where is your *dharma*? Where, your justice? Though a king, you are not acting justly.[291]

Virata answered Draupadi's indictment by citing a standard principle of criminal law (indisputable in its own place):

> Sairandhri! I have no knowledge of what actually happened between you and Keechaka. Without knowing the reality, those facts, what competence will I show in giving a verdict never the less?'[292]

That this was a clever escape was quickly shown by the *Mahabharata* itself. The Assembly condemned Keechaka's conduct towards Sairandhri on the basis of what was *seen*, and what was *seen* by everybody there in the Assembly, Keechaka kicking Sairandhri and her bleeding from her mouth, was ignoble and criminal enough to be condemned and punished straightaway.

To Yudhishthira, all this seemed too much—a *woman* telling a king what the *dharma* of a king was, and indicting him in the full house of the royal assembly that, in not protecting a woman from

290. Ibid.; unnumbered verses, ch. 16, Vol. 2, p. 1887.
291. Ibid., 16.30–33.
292. Ibid., 16.35.

being insulted and humiliated in his very presence, he was not true to his prescribed duty as a king! The *Mahabharata* shows this clearly, and is no interpretation. While the members of Royal Assembly were praising the woman, and condemning Keechaka's behaviour towards her,

Yudhishthira (to Draupadi)

Sairandhri! Stay here no longer. You had better go inside, to Queen Sudeshna's palace.[293]

He then proceeded to give her a brief lecture, wholly out of place, on what the *pativrata*-s, women faithful to their husbands, are like, that is, ought to be like. Furthermore, he delivered another brief discourse on the virtues of forgiveness and reconciliation,[294] something he had done earlier too, and his views on this subject were as familiar to Draupadi as hers to him. When the woman still kept standing there, Yudhishthira spoke to her rudely this time, forgetting what he had said at the beginning of their incognito exile, 'Her (Draupadi's) dignity is more important to us than even our own lives.' Now he said to her:

Sairandhri! You do not understand what appropriate occasion is; that is why you are standing in the Royal Assembly and crying like a performer on the stage, disturbing the game of dice being played by the royal princes.

Sairandhri! Go from here. The *gandharva*-s will punish those who have done you ill.[295]

Those five husbands of yours, the *gandharva*-s, are not coming to you now, because they do not think it is an appropriate time to express their anger.[296]

Sairandhri (to Yudhishthira)

I shall always remain steadfast in *dharma* towards the *gandharva*-s, the eldest brother of whom is addicted to gambling.[297]

293. Ibid., 16.40.
294. Ibid., unnumbered verses, ch. 16, Vol. 2, p. 1890.
295. Ibid., 16.43–44.
296. Ibid., 16.42.
297. Ibid., 16.45.

Saying this, Sairandhri, her hair open, her eyes red with anger, returned to Queen Sudeshna's rooms, only to be asked by her why she was in that state? Draupadi answered: 'knowing everything about what happened, why pretend that you know nothing?' 'If you so wish, Sairandhri', the Queen said, 'I shall have Keechaka killed.' That was more rhetorical than sincere. Draupadi said: 'That work will be accomplished by someone else. You prepare a requiem for your brother.'[298]

On several earlier occasions when she was in trouble, Draupadi had sought divine help, that of Krishna. In their present situation, that was out of the question; for Krishna's arrival would have exposed their true identity. She sought human help, and instinctively thought of Bhima. Deeply troubled in her mind, in the night she went to where Bhima was, in the royal kitchen, and found him sleeping. When he awoke, he asked her: 'you look so troubled, tell me why? Is there anything I can do for you?'[299] In the light of the events that had taken place in the Assembly, and which he had seen, that was a rather fatuous question. In a long lament, Draupadi opened her heart to him.

Saying to her, 'With the work that you have to do (as maid to Queen Sudeshna), how rough your hands have become', Bhima pressed Draupadi's hands to his face—and began to cry.[300] In that moment of unspeakable tenderness and caring, it seemed that Draupadi's pains were dissolved, if only for a moment. She would cherish that moment till her last day.

Draupadi's lament to Bhima had three inter-related cries: her pain and suffering at the mean situation not she alone but the Pandava-s were reduced to, particularly in that incognito period, the thirteenth year; her reproach against Yudhishthira for being mainly accountable for bringing them all to that situation; and her resolve that Keechaka had to be killed if she were to remain safely and with dignity in the Virata household for the remaining days of their hidden

298. Ibid., 16.51.
299. Ibid., 17.18–20.
300. Ibid., 20.30–31; also 21.1.

exile. These inter-related cries of Draupadi, as the cries of a woman in a particular situation, have to be *felt* and not just *read.*

Let us briefly hear Draupadi's reproach against Yudhishthira, expressed only to Bhima:

> Bring to account that elder brother of yours, whose acts have put me in this degrading situation.[301]
>
> After putting his kingdom, his own self, and all of us on the stake, which gambler other than this one will gamble with exile-in-forest-on-losing as a final stake?[302]

(After describing the numerous degrading acts which Yudhishthira, Bhima, Arjuna, Nakula and Sahadeva have to perform, often in public, in the service of King *Virata*)[303]

> Do you think I remain unaffected when I see all that? Can you not understand my pain and my suffering when I see those spectacles? It is because of Yudhishthira that I suffer every day those countless pains.[304]
>
> It is because of your brother that today I, who had hundreds of maids to attend upon me, attend as a maid upon Sudeshna.[305]

Bhima appealed to Draupadi not to indict Yudhishthira, even if justly. 'If he were to hear your just indictment of him, he would not live for a moment', Bhima said to her, 'Arjuna, Nakula and Sahadeva will not be able to live if they were to hear from you your criticism of Yudhishthira; and then I will not live either.'[306] 'Now only fifteen days are left in our completing this one year of incognito exile. Have patience and you shall soon be Queen again.'[307] Draupadi answered: 'Dearest Bhima, what I said was the cry of a woman unable to bear her suffering, feeling helpless, desperately unhappy. I shall not reproach Yudshishthira. There is no point in repeating things that are past. Be ready to do what the time has come for.'[308]

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301. Ibid., 18.10.
302. Ibid., 18.11; 18.12–14.
303. Ibid., 18.15–33; 19.2–13; 19.14–31; 19.33–41; and 19.42–44 respectively.
304. Ibid., 19.45.
305. Ibid., 20.1; read the whole chapter.
306. Ibid., 21.8–9.
307. Ibid., 21.17.
308. Ibid., 21.18–19.

In narrating the story of Draupadi's life, which with some differences may be the story of many women, the *Mahabharata* very realistically asks: 'can *every* human situation wait for the most prudent time to resolve it?' Draupadi's answer was: 'There is a time to be prudent; and there is a time to act decisively when the situation demands it.'

Draupadi was neither irrationally emotional nor foolish when she said to Bhima: 'If you keep honouring to the letter this condition of one year of incognito exile, you will find your wife dead by the time you complete it.'[309] She narrated to him in sequence the events pertaining to Keechaka's pursuit of her. She said that, feeling even more encouraged at not being punished by the king Keechaka would hereafter pursue her with greater determination, and, on being repulsed again, would insult and humiliate her furthermore. With him alive for another day, it would be impossible for her to live with honour and dignity. She would sooner kill herself than live with the indignity of submitting to Keechaka's lust. Saying that she was in a state of terror, she put her face on Bhima's chest and sobbed desperately.[310] He quickly decided what he had to do in order to protect his wife, and would not this time consult Yudhishthira, much less tell him what he was going to do—kill Keechaka the next day.[311] He consoled Draupadi with many expressions of love and care. At the same time a plan was drawn, so that nobody would know who killed Keechaka and Bhima's identity would not be revealed.

The next morning, as Draupadi had dreaded, Keechaka solicited in most extravagant terms, union with Sairandhri. According to the plan, she suggested that he visit her that night in the Dance Hall where a bed was already in place, but none of his friends or relatives should know of his visit will her. Draupadi informed Bhima that Keechaka would be coming as planned. Bhima came and, covering himself, lay on the bed. Keechaka soon arrived and thinking that the one on the bed was Sairandhri, proceeded to caress 'her.' Bhima sprang up, and seized Keechaka by his throat. Then began their

309. Ibid., 21.40.
310. Ibid., 21.49.
311. Ibid., for the killing of Keechaka see ch. 22.

fight: Keechaka was not a weak opponent; but Bhima soon prevailed upon him, and killed him in such a manner that his hands, legs, neck and head were pushed deep into his torso. That accomplished, Bhima invited Draupadi to come and see her tormentor's mangled body, saying to her: 'whoever will insult or humiliate you, will meet this fate.'[312] Saying this, he returned to the royal kitchen.

He would still have much to do the next day for his wife Draupadi.

As day broke, the distant brothers of Keechaka came to know of his slaying, and gathered round his body, astonished at its condition, the hands, legs, neck and the head pushed deep into the torso. They were convinced that it could not be the work of a human but of a *gandharva*. While preparing Keechaka's remains for cremation, they saw Sairandhri (Draupadi) standing some distance away behind a pillar. Their anger roused, they thought she was responsible for the slaying of Keechaka and they resolved to burn her along with Keechaka's remains. That needed the king's permission, which was promptly given; for Virata was no less afraid of Keechaka's brothers than he was of Keechaka. The royal permission obtained, they seized Sairandhri, bound her to the dead man's bier, and proceeded towards the cremation ground. Draupadi called out to the Pandava-s with the secret names they had given each other at the beginning of the incognito-exile, and known only to her. Hearing her call, Bhima rushed to her help. Uprooting a huge tree, with its trunk as a weapon in his hand, he challenged the Keechaka-s. In a fight that followed, he killed all one-hundred-and-five of them and liberated Sairandhri.[313] Still fearful, she walked towards the royal kitchen and found Bhima standing in the doorway. In sign language that none could have understood, Sairandhri said to Bhima: 'My salutation to the *gandharva* who liberated me from a great disaster.'[314]

She then returned to the palace—only to be told by the Queen on behalf of the King:[315]

312. Ibid., 22.87.
313. For this entire happening, see ibid., ch. 23.
314. Ibid., 24.14–15.
315. Ibid., 24.27–28; see also 24.2–5; 24.9–10.

Sairandhri! Go where you wish, and go soon.

The King is fearful of the *gandharva*-s protecting you. You are young, and none on this planet can surpass your beauty. Men love beauty; and should they, inadvertently, do towards you what is not right, they might face the wrath of your *gandharva*-s.

Go where you wish.

Sairandhri (to Queen Sudeshna)

Seeking service under you, I came here for a special purpose. Only thirteen days are now left for it to be completed; and the *gandharva*-s, too, would have completed their mission. Thereafter they will come to take me back and will do much good to you and to the King.[316]

King Virata has done to the *gandharva*-s great good, and they remain deeply grateful to him. Proud of their strength, they are good-natured, and wish to return a good deed done to them. I request you to let me stay with you a few more days. It will do only good to you.[317]

Sudeshna (to Sairandhri)

Very well, live here as long as you wish. But protect especially my husband and my sons. For this, now I am under *your* protection.[318]

What the Queen meant by that, was perfectly clear to Sairandhri.

Meanwhile Duryodhana had sent his spies in all directions to trace the Pandava-s; for he was now increasingly fearful that should the Pandava-s complete their incognito-year of exile without being discovered, they would claim their kingdom back and become a threat to the Kaurava-s. Even his best spies could not trace them.

The thirteenth year passed, too. When out of greed and malice the Kaurava-s broke the condition that after the stipulated period of exile the Pandava-s would have their kingdom restored to them, a war seemed inevitable. Yudhishthira suggested one last attempt at reconciliation; and Krishna agreed to be the ambassador of

316. Ibid., 24.29–30.
317. Ibid., two unnumbered verses after verse 30, Vol. 2, p. 1921.
318. Ibid., two last unnumbered verses, Vol. 2, p. 1921.

reason and peace.[319] Krishna would go to the royal court, at Hastinapura, and ask the Kaurava-s to behave towards their cousins, the Pandava-s, justly and honourably.

Draupadi forcefully but rationally argued against any such move. Her reasoning was based on her clear understanding, derived from past experience, of what Duryodhana and his brothers were like. She listed the earlier attempts at peace, and how each had failed.[320] This attempt at reconciliation was going to be no different; for the Kaurava-s would take it as yet another sign of weakness. A war would doubtless have to be fought to wrench from the unjust what was justly one's inheritance. In that case, this mission of peace would receive not respect but insult, invited gratuitously. Every word of Draupadi's reasoning proved to be true.

Bhima, the mighty one, had also spoken in favour of peace and reconciliation.[321] Draupadi was more disappointed than angry; for his reasoning had seemed to her wrong; it had seemed wrong to Sri Krishna as well, who told him why.[322] Now she spoke with emotional fire:

Draupadi (to Krishna)

(Her husbands listening—with awe)

Krishna, when Duryodhana is alive even for one moment, shame on Arjuna's skill in archery, shame on Bhima's strength.[323]

If I am worthy of your grace, and if you are kind to me, Krishna, keep your anger always against those sons of Dhritarashtra.

In all that you do towards peace, Krishna, remember these locks of my hair with which Duhshasana had dragged me.

If I cannot see that arm of Duhshasana cut into pieces and lying in the dust, what peace can there be in my heart?

I have spent these thirteen years waiting for that moment, keeping this anger in my heart like a burning fire.

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319. *Udyoga-parva,* Ch. 71.
320. Ibid., 82.4–9.
321. Ibid, 74.20–23.
322. See *Udyoga-parva,* ch. 75.
323. *Vana-parva,* 12.78; also *Udyoga-parva,* 82.31.

What pierces my heart today, like arrows, are the words of Bhima. Disregarding my pain, he now sees only *dharma*.[324]

Yudhishthira had never understood the undeniable truth of the pain of hurt and humiliation, which Draupadi was asserting. Draupadi never understood the undeniable necessity of transcending them—in one's self-interest. But *transcending* experience is not the same as, *dissolving* it in some philosophical abstraction, *denying its reality*. Draupadi was asserting its reality, the reality of injustice and the resolve to fight against it.

Draupadi's open hair, by which Duhshasana had dragged her, is the *Mahabharata*'s powerful metaphor for indecency, injustice, and cruelty, *adharma*, to a woman. Each time she flashed them, with tears of pain and anger in her eyes, she was invoking that metaphor. However, it was always, as on this occasion, at the end of what she would say on principle, impersonally. This time, too, addressing Sri Krishna, the substance of what she had said, on principle, impersonally, was: 'Just as it is a *dosha*, serious demerit, an offence, to punish an innocent person who had done no wrong; it is a serious demerit, an offence, not to punish the one who deserved to be punished. Those who know *dharma* know this.'[325] It was only *after* that, she spoke personally, with emotional fire, and that too, as she said to him: 'It is because I completely trust you, Keshava, I will repeat what I had said earlier.'[326]

He said to Draupadi:

Krishne! The women of those wicked men of the Kuru clan, who insulted and humiliated you, will one day weep over their dead.[327]

Krishne! Hold your tears. I promise you, you will soon see your enemies killed and your husbands endowed again with their kingdom and prosperity.[328]

Krishna knew, as Draupadi did, that his peace mission to the Kaurava-s would end in nothing. Duryodhana not only behaved

324. *Udyoga-parva*, 82.32–41.
325. Ibid., 82.18.
326. Ibid., 82.20–41.
327. Ibid., 82.45.
328. Ibid., 82.49.

insultingly to Krishna but also planned to put him in prison. There was not even the remotest prospect of peace.

* * *

A war was fought for eighteen days between the Pandava-s and the Kaurava-s, with incalculable human destruction. Bhima killed Duhshasana, tore open his chest and drank his blood, as he had promised to Draupadi he would as a gruesome punishment for what Duhshasana had done to her. Bhima fatally broke Duryodhana's thighs, and left him to die a slow death, as punishment for that obscene gesture he had made to Draupadi, exposing his thighs and signalling to her to sit on it. Arjuna had killed Karna. Draupadi's brother, Dhrishtadyumna, had killed Dronacharya. That the manner of Arjuna killing Karna, Dhrishtadyumna killing Drona, and Bhima killing Duryodhana was even at that time open to grave objections, being in violation of the rules of a war fought fairly, is a different story that the *Mahabharata* examines impartially.

The Pandava-s had won the war. That very night Draupadi suffered a cruel blow, none more cruel than any she had suffered until then. Her five sons, Prativindhya, Sutasoma, Shatanika, Shrutakarma and Shutakirti, as they slept in the Panchala camp, were murdered one by one in a revenge killing by Ashvatthama, son of Dronacharya, and one of the only three survivors on the Kaurava side.

Ashvatthama had also strangled to death Draupadi's brother Dhrishtadyumna, as he slept in his bed, in revenge for the killing of Ashvatthama's father Drona in a manner most despicable.[329]

Next morning the news was brought to the Pandava-s. Lamenting the killing of their sons, Yudhishthira said:

> I am now exceedingly worried about Krishnā. Already she is very weak from anxiety. Now, on learning about the killings of her sons and her brother, she will be drowned in grief that will kill her.[330]

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329. For the details of these two happenings, Ashvatthama killing Draupadi's brother Dhrishtadyumna and her five sons, and the subsequent events, see Chaturvedi Badrinath *The Mahabharata. An Inquiry in the Human Condition* cited earlier, pp 129–141.

Draupadi was staying elsewhere with the women of the Panchala royal family, her paternal family. Nakula was sent to fetch her. In grief and misery she collapsed, 'looking like the sun totally eclipsed'. It was Bhima, always so tender with her, who lifted her in his arms and tried to console her.[331] Yudhishthira, too, tried to console her. But by saying what he did, he only deepened her grief more: 'Dear one, do not grieve for your sons and for your brother. Fighting as *dharma* would enjoin, they have attained a death *dharma* would celebrate.'

Increasingly impatient with Yudhishthira who, like an unfeeling philosopher, would engage her in long conversations about the virtues of forgiveness whenever she talked of her pain, Draupadi now mockingly addressed him thus:

> Congratulations! By sacrificing your sons to Lord Death in accordance with kshattriya obligation, you have conquered a whole world. Enjoy it now well!
>
> Congratulations! Yourself safe, you have gained a whole world. Now you will not remember your nephew Abhimanyu.
>
> Fortunate, too, that after the killings of your sons you will still live with me, and will not remember them at all.
>
> My grief at their death by that evil son of Dronacharya is now burning me as a fire would burn dry wood.

You had better now pay heed to my resolve. If, in retribution of his evil deed, that wicked and evil Ashvatthama is not killed, I shall end my life.[332]

Draupadi turned to Bhima, recalled those many times in the past when he had protected and saved her, and said to him: 'Bhima! Only you can save me again. Find that evil son of Dronacharya and kill him for what he did.'[333] Unable to bear her tears Bhima prepared his chariot—for his journey of retribution. Nakula went with him. Fearing that, alone by himself, Bhima was highly vulnerable to Ashvatthama, Yudhishthira, Arjuna and Sri Krishna soon followed him. The

330. *Sauptika-parva*, 10.24–26.
331. Ibid., 11.7–8.
332. Ibid., 11.9–15.
333. Ibid., 11.21–26.

subsequent events make a long story, with its many lessons.[334] Here briefly described, Ashvatthama was found, overpowered after his fight with Arjuna, divested of the magic jewel he wore on his head. His life was spared because he was the son of their guru, but a curse was pronounced upon him by Krishna, and he was allowed to go.

With the speed of wind they returned to where Draupadi was, drowned in her grief and sorrow. Bhima said to her:

> Krishne! Here is the charmed jewel of Ashvatthama, the killer of your sons.
>
> When Krishna was going on a peace mission to the Kaurava-s, do you remember what you had said to him then?
>
> On hearing that, for the sake of peace, Yudhishthira was keen on agreement with the Kaurava-s, you had spoken to Krishna these very hard words: 'Govinda! I have neither husband, nor son, nor brother, not even you.'
>
> The usurper of our kingdom, Duryodhana, is killed. I drank the blood of Duhshasana who had insulted you. Enmity has been fully avenged,
>
> We let Ashvatthama go alive because he is the son of our guru, and is also a brahmana. His renown reduced to dust, he has with him only his physical body left. His charmed jewel taken from him, he is completely disarmed.[335]

Draupadi (to Bhima)

> In my eyes, too, the son of a guru is like the guru himself. I only wanted the killings of my sons avenged, and that has been achieved. Let this magic jewel taken from Ashvatthama adorn Yudhishthira.[336]

* * *

At her *svayam-vara* ceremony, when Karna, another aspirant for her hand, had come closest to meeting the target set by her father to win her, Draupadi had contemptuously and loudly announced *I will not marry the son of a charioteer, a suta-putra*, insulting Karna

334. Narrated in detail in Badrinath's *Mahabharata* already cited, pp.138–141.
335. *Sauptika-parva*, 16,28–33.
336. Ibid., 16.34.

grievously. On hearing her pronouncement, Karna had withdrawn with admirable dignity, without saying a word. The *Mahabharata* does not mention Draupadi's thoughts and feelings on learning many years later, which along with her husbands she also must have, that Karna was not the son of a charioteer, a *suta-putra*, but Kunti's first-born, the eldest brother of the Pandava-s.

It was not from Kunti but from Shri Krishna that Karna had heard that she was his biological mother and he was the eldest of her sons.

Just before the war was to begin, Krishna had invited Karna for a private talk and suggested that they take a ride together, which they did. The purpose of Krishna was to persuade Karna to switch sides. The following conversation took place between them.[337]

Krishna (to Karna)

Radheya! You know the eternal principles of the Veda-s. You are highly learned in the intricacies of the law according to the *dharma-shastra*. Living a disciplined life, pursuing knowledge, you have, in conversations with eminent brahmana-s, had your doubts resolved.[338]

Karna! A son born to a girl before her marriage is called *kanina,* and the one after her marriage *sahodha.* In either case, the man whom the girl marries is considered the father.[339]

Thus, in the eyes of dharmic law, you too are the son of Pandu; and being the eldest, you should be the king, according to the settled decision of *dharma-shastra.*[340]

On our return, let the Pandava-s know that you are the son of Kunti and were born prior to Yudhishthira. Your younger brothers the five Pandava-s, and the five sons of Draupadi, and the invincible Abhimanyu, will touch your feet.[341]

Besides, all the kings and princes assembled to fight on the side of the Pandava-s will honour you and bow their heads in submission. Many a prince and many a princess will greet you with all the material required at a coronation. Let Dhaumya, the eminent family

337. Narrated in the *Udyoga-parva* of the *Mahabharata*, Chs. 140–142.
338. Ibid., 140.6–7.
339. Ibid., 140.8.
340. Ibid., 140.9.
341. Ibid., 140.11.

priest, anoint you as king. The five Pandava-s; the five sons of Draupadi; the kings of Panchala and Chedi domains; and I will crown you as emperor. Yudhishthira will be your crown prince and will sit behind you in your chariot: Bhimasena will, after your coronation, stand behind you with a silver canopy over your head; Arjuna will drive your chariot; and Abhimanyu will attend upon you always.[342]

The court singers will sing your glory; the Pandava-s will declare your authority; and the different peoples of what will be your vast empire will follow you in submission.[343]

Kaunteya (son of Kunti), rule over a vast empire, and make your mother Kunti happy.[344]

Karna (to Krishna)[345]

What you have said, you have said doubtless for my good! I know it as well as you that in the eyes of *dharma-shastra* I am decidedly the son of Pandu (and therefore most of what you have listed is my legitimate inheritance and my right.)

But Kunti had abandoned me at my birth, which could have done me no good. Adhiratha saw me in a basket floating on the river; picked me up, took me to his home, and placed me in the lap of his childless wife Radha. On seeing me, her breasts swelled with a mother's milk. She fed me from her breasts; and cleaned me. They reared me as their son, and I knew *them* as my father and my mother.[346]

Govinda! Not for all the gold of the world, nor for the kingdom even of this entire earth, nor for the prospects of earthly pleasure, nor out of fear, will I ever render that *relationship false.*[347]

Karna continued addressing Krishna:

Furthermore, for thirteen years I have lived with Duryodhana in his father Dhritarashtra's household, and I have received from them utmost honour.[348]

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342. Ibid., 140.17–22.
343. Ibid., 140.23–27.
344. Ibid., 140.28–29.
345. *Udyoga-parva*, the whole Ch. 141.
346. Ibid., 141.3–4; 5–7. For the full story of Karna's birth and abandonment, see *Vana-parva*, Chs.308–309.
347. *Udyoga-parva*, 141.12.
348. Ibid., 141.13–16.

At this time, neither out of fear of being killed or taken a prisoner, nor any other fear, nor out of greed, will I act dishonourably towards Duryodhana.[349]

Karna continued:

Madhusudana! Let this confidential conversation between us remain between us only. That will be the best.[350]

Were Yudhishthira to know that I am in actual fact Kunti's first-born son, he, steeped in *dharma* in every way, would never accept to be the king.[351]

In that case, getting this vast empire, I will hand it over to Duryodhana.[352]

Describing in a metaphorical language the forthcoming war between the Pandava-s and the Kaurava-s as a *yajna*, great sacrificial rite, Karna then proceeded to describe in detail his inner certainty as regards its outcome—the Pandava-s would be victorious, and all the greats on the side of Duryodhana, including himself, would perish.[353] Even so, he would not switch sides and behave dishonourably.

Krishna (to Karna)

It seems that the vast empire I have been telling you how to gain, does not interest you.[354]

It did not. A dishonourable proposal was rejected honourably. It remained forever locked in Karna's heart. Karna never ceased to call himself 'Radheya', 'son of Radha', with pride, gratitude and love.

Kunti owning up the truth of Karna being her eldest son coincided with Karna's death, when nothing mattered any more. Karna had been killed in battle by Arjuna; the war was over; and the women were lamenting their dead, and had come to the banks of the river Ganga to offer to their dead their last salutation, the ritualistic

349. Ibid., 141.17.
350. Ibid. 141.20.
351. Ibid, 141.21.
352. Ibid., 141.22.
353. *Udyoga-parva*, 141.29–51.
354. Ibid., 142.2.

jalanjali.[355] It was in this setting that Kunti asked her sons to offer the *jalanjali* for Karna who, she tells them, was actually their eldest brother, her first born, and not the son of a *suta* and his wife Radha as they had until then believed him to be.[356] She told them that she had conceived Karna from the Sun-god Surya.[357]

She told them nothing more, still concealing the whole truth.

However, what their mother told them was enough to stun the Pandava-s. Yudhishthira began his lament and his high tribute to their slain brother Karna, and finally said: 'Now I am burning in deepest grief for my brother Karna, as if someone had pushed me in burning fire. If only I had known the truth earlier, there would not have been this devastating war.'[358] Saying this, he began to weep inconsolably. Many women, weeping already for their dead, began to weep now for Karna.

As a final act, because he could not curse his mother Yudhishthira cursed all women instead: 'From now onwards women will never be able to keep in their hearts a secret.'[359]

Had Karna accepted Krishna's strongly urged proposal, about which Draupadi knew nothing, it would have unquestionably made her position untenable in every way, even though she was not a part of the list of what was offered to him in exchange for coming over to the side of the Pandava-s. By acting in a most honourable way, Karna had saved Draupadi from the flames of a dreadful future.

Did Draupadi ever send at least a silent apology to the dead Karna for her insulting him publicly once? The *Mahabharata* does not say that she did.

Did Draupadi ever say in the silence of her heart a word of gratitude, or at least a word of admiration, for Karna for his rejecting a dishonourable proposal that would have, if he had accepted it, seriously compromised her position? The *Mahabharata* does not say that she did.

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355. *Stri-parva*, Ch. 27.
356. Ibid., 27.7–12.
357. Ibid., 27.12.
358. Ibid., 27.24.
359. Ibid., 27.29.

However, Yudhishthira continued to grieve for Karna. He confided in the visiting sage Narada that what was now burning him, 'as fire burns dried cotton', was that in his greed for kingdom he had unknowingly had 'one brother killed by another brother'.[360] 'After learning from our mother Kunti that Karna was our eldest brother', Yudhishthira said, 'and in killing Karna, Arjuna had killed his elder brother, my heart is in deepest pain.'

Yudhishthira confided in Narada something more: 'During that game of dice, when Karna spoke wounding words, my anger would subside as soon as I looked at his feet. I believe that Karna's feet resembled those of Kunti. I used to wonder why there was between Karna's and Kunti's feet such remarkable likeness; but I never could find the reason why.'[361]

* * *

Yudhishthira grieved for Draupadi's condition, too. She had lost five sons in a revenge killing by Ashvatthama after the war had been won by the Pandava-s. He acknowledged that she had been devoted to securing in every way the well being of her husbands.[362] That well being consisted also in her teaching that what is right in its own place should, however, never be turned into an absolute theory, and then presumed to be right *always,* leading to its untruth and its violence. This service, which Yudhishthira required especially, she did till the end.

Sincerely desolate over the vast destruction of the war and its unimaginable human suffering, Yudhishthira declared to his brothers and to Draupadi that he had no taste for a kingdom that had been secured after such gigantic destruction. Then he declared his decision, *with its reasoning,* to renounce everything; abdicate in favour of Arjuna, for he himself had no interest in being Emperor; and for the rest of his life live as an anchorite, a renouncer, a *sannyasi,* in the forest.[363] His brothers argued with him that his reasoning for taking

360. *Shanti-parva,* 1.24.
361. Ibid., 1.42.
362. Ibid., 1.17.
363. Ibid., ch.7.

to the forest was all wrong. It was only after each one of them had spoken much of it impersonally, on principle; Draupadi spoke to Yudhishthira, mostly seeking to correct a wrong reasoning as they had done and as many others soon would. It is necessary to say this, again here, in order to correct a widespread but wrong impression about Draupadi: that she was argumentative, showing off her learning.

That bit about his abdicating in favour of Arjuna, had stung Arjuna. He spoke to Yudhishthira angrily and with a flourish, pointing out that his reasoning for taking to the forest seemed to be an outcome of '*manda buddhi*', 'low intelligence', unworthy of a kshattriya, and gave him a long discourse first on the importance of material well-being, of money, in a man's life and then, for a kshattriya, on the ideal of living *grihastha ashrama* life-in-family.[364] Justifying his decision, Yudhishthira countered everything Arjuna had said;[365] and Arjuna spoke again, on governance, *danda*, as the foundation of civil society, and on the *dharma* of law and governance, *rajadanda-dharma*. Consistent with its method, the *Mahabharata* was discussing in two different voices two opposite ideals of life. Yudhishthira did not seem to be persuaded by what Arjuna was saying.

Thereupon, even more angrily and candidly, Bhima spoke to Yudhishthira, with his reasoning why Yudhishthira's decision to retire to the forest was mistaken,[366] indeed in complete violation of the *dharma* of a kshattriya, of the one entrusted with governance.[367] Most of what he said was impersonal, on principle, propounding the duties of a king, *rajadanda-dharma*. But he also spoke far more personally than Arjuna had, and in much harsher words.[368] He asked if Yudhishthira were to renounce the kingdom no sooner than he had gained it by fighting a dreadful war, an evidently irrational thing to do, then why did he in the first place throw them all in the hellish fire of that war? Furthermore, Bhima said, he now blamed himself and his other brothers for following Yudhishthira without questioning

364. Ibid., chs. 8,11 and 18.
365. Ibid., ch. 9.
366. Ibid., ch.10.
367. Ibid., 10.18–19.
368. For this see Ibid., 10.1; 16.16–18.

his wisdom, simply because he was their eldest brother, but 'a man of poor intelligence'.[369]

Bhima said to him much more, but with a respectful preamble,

> You know what *dharma* is; there is little you do not know; we have always learnt from you, and it is not for us to teach you. Several times I resolved to myself that hereafter I would say nothing; but greatly pained and confused after your declaration that you are taking to the forest, I must speak.[370]
>
> So knowledgeable, now an Emperor, why do you bring into your mind such cowardly thoughts?[371]
>
> There are those who, happy now, remember only the painful things of the past; and there are those who, unhappy in the present, remember only the happy things of the past.[372]
>
> You do neither. Unhappy, you do not remember the painful things of the past; nor, happy, you remember the happy things of the past. This is your nature, courting pain thereby.[373]

He asked him to recall Draupadi's public humiliation on those several occasions and her consequent pain and suffering. Far more significantly, Bhima said to Yudhishthira:

> The battle with Dronacharya and Bhishma was one kind of battle: you have to fight another kind of battle—this time with your mind, and alone.
>
> In this battle, you require neither arrows nor friends nor relatives: you have to fight this battle alone.[374]
>
> If you do not conquer your mind in *this* battle, one does not know where it will take you.[375]

Nakula spoke, giving greatest importance to life-in-family, *grihastha-ashrama,* to dissuade Yudhishthira from what he had mistakenly resolved to do.[376] Sahadeva, the youngest of the brothers,

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369. Ibid., 10.14–15.
370. Ibid., 16.1–4.
371. Ibid., 16.5.
372. Ibid., 16.15.
373. Ibid., 16.16–17.
374. Ibid., 16.22–23.
375. Ibid., 16.26.
376. Ibid., ch.12.

spoke to Yudhishthira, saying that true renunciation was not in giving up exterior things but in renouncing the attachment of the self to things, and suggested that Yudhishthira should now govern his vast empire from that freedom from ego that does not come necessarily by taking to the forest.[377]

Enough had been said to Yudhishthira by his four brothers. If Draupadi spoke nevertheless, it was because she had noticed that Yudhishthira was not attentive to what was being said to him by his brothers, and she had to speak, and she did.

It is most significant that describing her before she addressed Yudhishthira, the *Mahabharata* speaks of her, and for the first time in that way, as '*abhimanavati*' 'especially in relation to Yudhishthira'.[378] The Sanskrit word '*abhimana*' means 'pride', 'haughtiness', 'self-conceit', 'too high an opinion of one's self'. Draupadi was none of these. Read in the whole context of her relationship with Yudhishthira, the word *abhimanavati* clearly means 'intellectually independent'.

That is unambiguously suggested by the *Mahabharata* in speaking of her in the same breath as 'one possessing the knowledge of *dharma*', '*dharmajna*', and as 'one attentive to *dharma*', '*dharma-darshini*'.[379] Whoever is even one of these in relation to one's self and in relation to the *other* will never be 'self-conceited' or 'haughty'.

And 'intellectual independence' in a woman is not contrary to *dharma.*

Draupadi (to Yudhishthira)

On hearing your decision, these brothers of yours are deeply distressed. They are repeatedly asking you to govern the kingdom you have gained, but you pay no attention to them.[380]

They have so far only suffered one calamity after another for your sake. Gladden their hearts now.[381]

377. Ibid., ch.13.
378. Ibid., 14.4.
379. Ibid., 14.4.
380. Ibid., 14.6.
381. Ibid., 14.7.

You have gained the kingdom neither by hearing scriptures; nor as a gift from somebody; neither from performing *yajna*; nor by begging. You have gained it by defeating an army protected by Drona, Karna, Ashvatthama and Kripa. Now take joy in what you have won and govern.[382]

Conquering many an island, and bringing under your rule many human habitations, you are now most highly regarded as king and universally obeyed; yet you don't seem to be happy.[383]

Your brothers are trying to make you see what your *dharma* as king is; but you are paying no attention to them. Neither what I am saying is misleading and false. In wanting to renounce what you have gained, and planning to retire to the forest when you should be governing, you are only inviting disaster for yourself.[384]

One who is a coward and impotent cannot govern; and the people under such a king, where there is no governance, can never be happy.[385]

Govern in the light of *dharma;* protect the poor and the helpless; punish the wicked; and bring joy to the people. Don't be disheartened.[386]

Vyasa and Krishna also spoke to Yudhishthira as Draupadi had.

* * *

Draupadi lived long to see much else happen.

After the war, although Yudhishthira was now the Emperor, he let his uncle Dhritarashtra remain nominally on the throne, and showed him every mark of respect. This was despite Bhima's strong objection. But things were not easy; they could not have been. Dhritarashtra and his wife Gandhari had lost all their sons in the war. Bhima had killed their eldest son, Duryodhana, and had drunk the blood of another after killing him, Duhshasana. The anger of Dhritarashtra and Gandhari was directed mostly at Bhima. They could not have lived together. But where could the old couple, Dhritarashtra and

382. Ibid, 14.18–20.
383. Ibid.,14.21–26.
384. Ibid.,14.36.
385. Ibid., 14.14.
386. Ibid., 14.16, 37–39.

Gandhari, have gone? After some years of difficult relationships, they decided where they could go—the forest—and they did. Vidura went with them. Surprisingly, so did Kunti, Draupadi's mother-in-law, even though Dhritarashtra and Gandhari tried to dissuade her. Her sons asked her as to why, if she were to do *that*, did she verbally whiplash them to fight for their rights, which meant war, her reply was that that was a different context; now the context being different she must in her remaining days take another path. Draupadi always had a special silent bond with her mother-in-law. A few years later, the Pandava-s learnt that their mother Kunti, along with Dhritarashtra, Gandhari and Vidura, had died in a forest fire.

Then followed another news that was especially distressing to Draupadi. Krishna was dead. Fulfilling Gandhari's curse upon him, for not preventing the war when he could have,[387] his whole clan had destroyed itself in a family war, and Krishna himself had died a lonely death. This was in the thirty-sixth year after the war. Arjuna went to Dwaraka, a city swallowed by the sea after Krishna's death, to bring the women of his household and the surviving aged Yadava-s to Hastinapura. On the way, a band of robbers attacked the caravan, and Arjuna could not protect the women from being taken away by the robbers. His famous bow did not work, and he himself felt he had no strength left in him anymore.

The Pandava-s, or rather Yudhishthira, decided it was time for them to go. Handing over the reins of the empire to their grandson Parikshit, meaning 'the last of the line', they set out on their last journey. Draupadi chose to be with them, till the last.[388] The *Mahabharata* significantly adds that none of the other three wives of Arjuna followed him: Ulupi, the Naga princess, immersed herself in the river Ganga; Chitrangada returned to Manipura; and Subhadra remained with her grandson Parikshit.[389] Draupadi chose to be with her husbands on this final journey of their lives. It was not clear what their destination was. Whatever it was, it seemed to have been mostly through the Himalayas, with all its rigours.

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387. Ibid., 50.39–46.
388. *Mahaprasthanik-parva*, ch.1.
389. Ibid., 1.27–28 and 1.7–9.

They walked in a single file, Yudhishthira heading them, Draupadi in the rear. Then she fell. She had fallen, but was still alive. She heard Bhima ask Yudhishthira: 'Why did Draupadi fall, she who was ever so virtuous and unfalteringly faithful?' The answer was even more mindless than the question. 'Draupadi fell because she was partial to Arjuna', pronounced Yudhishthira pompously.[390]

Draupadi fell because, now an elderly woman, she felt exhausted walking in the mountain paths, could not take a step more, and fell. Insensitive till the last, never understanding a woman's true feelings, uncaring, but talking endlessly about the great things of life, Yudhishthira did not look back, did not rush to help Draupadi to her feet. He had a theory about her.

Draupadi died. *Nathavati anathavati*, 'with husbands, yet destitute', was never truer of Draupadi than in the moments of her death.

However of Yudhishthira, let this also be said, in the words of the *Mahabharata*. When he was taken to Heaven in his earthly body form, he said to god Indra: 'I have no enthusiasm in being here. I want to be where my brothers are, where my Draupadi is.'[391]

390. Ibid., 2.3–5.
391. *Mahaprasthanik-parva*, 3.37–38.

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